

BRUCE OF THE
CIRCLE

A
HAROLD TITUS

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OF THE CIRCLE A

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BRUCE of The Circle A

By HAROLD TITUS

1888 -

AUTHOR OF
"I Conquered"



1918
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**BRUCE
OF THE CIRCLE A**

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CHAPTER I

THE WOMAN

Daylight and the Prescott-Phoenix train were going from Yavapai. Fifty paces from the box of a station a woman stood alone beside the track, bag in hand, watching the three red lights of the observation platform dwindle to a ruby unit far down the clicking ribbons of steel. As she watched, she felt herself becoming lost in the spaciousness, the silence of an Arizona evening.

Ann Lytton was a stranger in that strange land. Impressions pelted in upon her — the silhouetted range against the cerise flush of western sky; the valley sweeping outward in all other directions to lose itself in the creeping blue-grays of night; droning voices of men from the station; a sense of her own physical inconsequence; her loneliness . . . and, as a background, the insistent vastness of the place.

Then, out of the silence from somewhere not far off, came a flat, dead crash, the report of a firearm. The woman was acutely conscious that the voices in the station had broken short with an abruptness which

alarmed her. The other sound — the shot — had touched fear in her, too, and the knowledge that it had nipped the attention of the talking men sent a cool thrill down her limbs.

A man emerged from the depot and his voice broke in,

“Wonder where that —”

He stopped short and the woman divined the reason. She strained to catch the thrum of running hoofs, knowing intuitively that the man, also, had ceased speaking to listen. She was conscious that she trembled.

Another man stepped into the open and spoke, hurriedly, but so low that Ann could not hear; the first replied in the same manner, giving a sense of stealth, of furtiveness that seemed to the woman portentous. She took a step forward, frightened at she knew not what, wanting to run to the men just because she was afraid and they were human beings. She checked herself, though, and forced reason.

This was nonsense! She laid it on her nerves. They were ragged after the suspense and the long journey, the dread and hopes. A shot, a galloping horse, a suspected anxiety in the talk of the two men had combined to play upon them in their overwrought condition.

Then, the first speaker's voice again, in normal tone, “Trunk here, but I didn't see anybody get off.”

Ann wanted to laugh with relief. Just that one sentence linked her up with everyday life again, took the shake from her knees and the accented leap from her

heart. She was impelled to run to him, and held herself to a walk by effort.

"I beg your pardon. Can you tell me the name of the best hotel?" she asked.

The man who had seized the trunk stopped rolling it toward the doorway and turned quickly to look at the woman who stood there in the pallid glow from the one oil lamp. He saw a blue straw toque fitting tightly over a compact mass of black hair; he saw blue eyes, earnest and troubled; red lips, with the fullness of youth; flushed cheeks, a trim, small body clothed in a close fitting, dark suit.

"Yes, ma'am; it's th' Manzanita House. It's th' two-story buildin' up th' street. Is this your trunk?"

"Yes. May I leave it here until morning?"

The man nodded. "Sure," he answered.

"Thank you. Is there a carriage here?"

He set the trunk on end, wiped his palms on his hips and smiled slightly.

"No, ma'am. Yavapai ain't quite up to hacks an' things yet. We're young. You can walk it in two minutes."

Ann hesitated.

"It's . . . all right, is it?"

He did not comprehend.

"For me to walk, I mean. Just now. . . . It sounded as if some one shot, I thought."

He laughed.

"Oh, Yavapai's a safe place! Somebody just shot

at somethin', I guess. But it's all right. We ain't got no hacks, but we don't have no killin's either."

"I'm glad of the one anyhow," Ann smiled, and started away from him not, however, wholly reassured.

She walked toward the array of yellow lighted windows that showed through the deepening darkness, making her way over the hard ground, hurriedly, skirt lifted in the free hand. She had not inspected the shadowy town beyond glancing casually to register the ill-defined impressions of scattered stock pens, sprawling buildings, a short string of box-cars, a water-tank. The country, the location of the settlement, was the thing which had demanded her first attention, for it was all strange, new, a bit terrifying in the twilight. Two men passed her, talking; their voices ceased and she knew that they turned to stare; then one spoke in a lowered tone . . . and the night had them. A man on horseback rode down the street at a slow trot. She wondered uneasily if that was the horse which had raced away at the sound of the shot. From the most brilliantly lighted building the sound of a mechanical piano suddenly burst, hammering out a blatant melody.

A thick sprinkling of stars had pricked through the darkening sky and Ann, as she walked along, scanned the outline that each structure made against them. Once she laughed shortly to herself and thought,

"The two-story building!"

And, almost with that thought, she stood before it.

An oil lamp on an uncertain post was set close against the veranda and through an open window she saw a woman, bearing a tray, pause beside a table and deposit steaming dishes. She walked up the steps, opened the screen door, and entered an unlighted hall, barren, also, to judge from the sounds. On one side was the dining room; on the other, a cramped office.

"This is the Manzanita House?" she asked a youth who, hat on the back of his head, read a newspaper which was spread over the top of a small glass cigar case on the end of a narrow counter.

"Yes, ma'am"—evidently surprised.

He saw her bag, looked at her face again, took off his hat shyly and opened a ruled copybook to which a pencil was attached by a length of grimy cotton twine. He pushed it toward her, and the woman, as she drew off her glove, saw that this was the hotel register.

In a bold, large hand she wrote:

"Ann Lytton, Portland, Maine."

"I'd like a room for to-night," she said, "and to-morrow I'd like to get to the Sunset mine. Can you direct me?"

A faint suggestion of anxiety was in her query and on the question the youth looked at her sharply, met her gaze and let his waver off. He turned to put the register on the shelf behind him.

"Why, I can find out," he answered, evasively. "It's over thirty miles out there and th' road ain't so very good yet. You can get th' automobile to take

you. It's out now — took the doctor out this afternoon — and won't be back till late, prob'ly."

He took the register from the shelf again and, on pretext of noting her room number on the margin of the leaf, re-read her name and address, moving his lips in the soundless syllables.

"I'd . . . I'd like to go to my room, if I may," the woman said, and, picking up one of the two lighted lamps, the other led her into the hall and up the narrow flight of stairs.

Ten minutes later, the young man stood in the hotel kitchen, the house register in his hands. Over his right shoulder the waitress peered and over his left, the cook breathed heavily, as became her weight.

"Just Ann. It don't say Miss or Missus," the waitress said.

"I know, Nora, but somehow she don't look like *his* Missus," the boy said, with a shake of his head.

"From what you say about her, she sure don't. Are you goin' to tell her anythin'? Are you goin' to try to find out?"

"Not me. I wouldn't tell her nothin'! Gee, I wouldn't have th' nerve. Not after knowin' him and then takin' a real good look at a face like hers."

"If she is his, it's a dirty shame!" the girl declared, picking up her tray. She kicked open the swinging door and passed into the dining room.

CHAPTER II

SOME MEN

Ann Lytton ate alone — ate alone, but did not sit alone. She was the last patron of the dining room that evening, and, after Nora Brewster, the waitress, had surrounded her plate with an odd assortment of heavy side-dishes, she drew out a chair at the end of the table, seated herself, elbows on the limp, light linen, and, black eyes fast on the face of the other woman, pushed conversation.

"From the East, ain't you?" she began, and Ann smiled assent.

"New York?"

"No, not New York," and the blue eyes met the black ones, running quickly over the pretty, dark-skinned face, the thick coils of chestnut hair, noting the big, kindly mouth, the peculiarly weak chin. Obviously, the girl was striving to pump the newcomer and on the realization some of the trouble retreated far into the blue eyes and Ann smiled in kindness at Nora, as she parried the girl's direct questions.

In another mood a part of her might have resented this blunt curiosity, but just now it came as a relief from a line of thought which had been too long sus-

tained. And, after they had talked a few moments, the eastern woman found herself interested in the simplicity, the patent sincerity, of the other. The conversation flourished throughout the meal and by the time Ann had tasted and put aside the canned plums she had discovered much about Nora Brewster, while Nora, returning to the kitchen to tell the cook and the boy from the office all she had learned, awakened to the fact that she had found out nothing at all!

Ann walked slowly from the dining room into the office to leave instructions about her trunk, but the room was empty and she went back to the door which stood open and looked out into the street. From across the way the mechanical piano continued its racket, and an occasional voice was lifted in song or laughter. She thought again of the shot, the running horse. She watched the shadowy figures passing to and fro behind the glazed windows of the saloon and between her brows came a frown. She drew a deep breath, held it a long instant, then let it slip quickly out, ending in a little catch of a cough. She closed one hand and let it fall into the other palm.

"To-morrow at this time, I may know," she muttered.

She would have turned away and climbed the stairs, then, but on her last glance into the street a moving blotch attracted her attention. She looked at it again, closer; it was approaching the hotel and, after a moment she discerned the outlines of a man walking, lead-

ing a horse. A peculiar quality about his movements, an undistinguished part of the picture, held her in the doorway an instant longer.

Then, she saw that the man was carrying the limp figure of another and that he was coming directly toward her, striding into the circle of feeble light cast from the lamp on the post, growing more and more distinct with each step. A thrill ran through the woman, making her shudder as she drew back; the arms and legs of the figure that was being borne toward her swung so helplessly, as though they were boneless; the head, too, swayed from side to side. Yet these appearances, suggestive as they were of tragedy, did not form the influence which caused Ann's throat to tighten and her pulse to speed. She heard voices and footsteps as other men ran up. She drew back into the shadows of the hall.

"What you got, Bruce?" one asked, in a tone of concern.

"O, a small parcel of man meat," she heard the tall one explain casually, with something like amusement in his voice.

"Who is it?"

An answer was made, but the woman could not understand.

"Oh, *him!*" Disdain was in the voice, as though there were no longer cause for apprehension, as if the potential consequence of the situation had been dissipated by identification of the unconscious figure.

Other arrivals, fresh voices; out under the light a dozen men were clustered about the tall fellow and his burden.

"Where'd you find him?" one asked.

"Out at th' edge of town—in th' ditch. Abe, here,"—with a jerk of his head to indicate the sleek sorrel horse he led—"found him. He acted so damned funny he made me get off to see what it was, an', sure enough, here was Yavapai's most enthusiastic drinker, sleepin' in th' ditch!

"Here, let me put him down on th' porch, there,"—elbowing his way through the knot about him. "He ain't much more man in pounds than he is in principle, but he weighs up considerable after packin' him all this way."

The watching woman saw that his burden was a slight figure, short and slender, dressed roughly, with his clothing worn and torn and stained.

"Why didn't you let Abe pack him?" a man asked, as the big cowboy, stooping gently, put the inert head and shoulders to the boards and slowly lowered the limp legs. He straightened, and, with a red handkerchief, whipped the dust from his shirt. Then, he hitched up his white goatskin chaps and looked into the face of his questioner and smiled.

"Well, Tommy, Abe here ain't never had to carry a souse yet, an' I guess he won't have to so long as I'm around an' healthy. That right, Abe?"

He reached out a hand and the sorrel, intelligent ears forward in inquiry, moved closer by a step to smell the fingers; then, allowed them to scratch the white patch on his nose.

A chuckle of surprise greeted the man's remark.

"Why, Bruce, to hear you talk anybody'd think that you close-herded your morals continual; that you was a 'Aid S'city' wagon boss; that lips that touch liquor should never —"

"I ain't said nothin' to make you think that, Tommy Clary," the other replied, laughing at the upturned face of his challenger, who was short and pug-nosed and possessed of a mouth that refused to do anything but smile; who was completely over-shadowed and rendered top-heavy by a hat of astonishing proportions. "I drink," he went on, "like th' rest of us damn fools, but I don't think it's smart to do it. I think it is pretty much all nonsense, an' I think that when you drink you ought to associate with drinkin' folks an' let th' ones who have better sense alone.

"That's why I never ride Abe to town when I figure I'm goin' to be doin' any hellin' around; that's why, if I have got drunk by mistake when I had him here, I've slept in town instead of goin' home. Abe, you see, Tommy, has got a good deal of white man in him for a horse. He'd carry me all right if I was drunk, if I asked him to; but I won't, because he's such a *good* horse that he ought to always have a mighty good man

on his middle. When a man's drunk, he ain't good . . . for nothin'. Like this here"—with a contemptuous movement of one booted foot to indicate the huddle of a figure which lay in the lamplight.

"No, I don't make no claim to bein' a saint, Tommy. Good Lord, *hombre*, do you think, if I thought I was right decent all th' time, all through, I'd ever be seen swapping lies with any such ugly outcast as you are?"

The others laughed again at that, and the tall man removed his hat to wipe the moisture from his forehead.

Ann, watching from the shadows, lips pressed together, heart on a rampage from a fear that was at once groundless and natural, saw his fine profile against the lamp, as he laughed good-naturedly at the man he had jibed. His head was flung back boyishly, but about its poise, its lines, the way it was set on his sturdy neck, was an indication of superb strength, a fine mettle. His hair fell backward from the brow. It tended toward waviness and was dry and light in texture as well as in color, for the rays of the light were scattered and diffused as they shot through it. He was incredibly tall in his high-heeled riding boots, but his breadth was in proportion. The movements of his long arms, his finely moulded shoulders, his whole lithe torso were well measured, splendidly balanced, of that natural grace and assurance which marks the inherent leadership born in individuals. His voice went well

with the rest of him, for it was smooth and deep and filled with capabilities of expression.

"Well, if you think all us drunkards are such buzzard fodder, what are you packin' this around with you for?" Clary asked, after the laughter had subsided.

The cowman looked down thoughtfully a moment and his face grew serious. He shook his head soberly.

"This fellow's a cripple, boys; that's all. Just a cripple," he explained.

"Cripple! He's about th' liveliest, most cantankerous, trouble-maker this country has had to watch since Bill Williams named his mountain!" a man in the group scoffed.

"Yes, I know. His legs ain't broke or deformed; he can use both arms; his fool tongue has made us all pretty hot since we've knowed him. But he ain't right up here, in his head, boys. He's crippled there. There ain't no reason for a human bein' gettin' to be so nasty as he's got to be. It ain't natural. It's th' booze, Tommy, th' booze that's crippled him. He ought to be kept away from it until he's had a chance, but nobody's took enough interest in him or th' good of th' town to tend to that. We've just locked him up when he got too drunk an' turned him loose to hell some more when he was half-way sober. He ain't had nobody to look out for him, when he's needed it more 'n anything else.

"I ain't blamin' nobody. Don't know as I'd looked out for him myself, if he hadn't looked so helpless, there 'n th' ditch. Gosh, any one of you'd take in a dog with a busted leg an' try to fix him up; if he bit at you an' scratched and tried to fight, you'd only feel sorrier for him. This feller . . . he's kind of a dog, too. Maybe it'd be a good investment for us to look after him a little an' see if we can't set him on his feet. We've tried makin' an example of him; now let's try to treat him like any of you'd treat me, if I was down an' out."

He looked down upon the figure on the porch; in his voice had been a fine humane quality that set the muscles of the listening woman's throat contracting.

"Say, Bruce, he's bleedin'!"

On the man's announced discovery the group outside again became compact about the unconscious man and the tall cowboy squatted beside him quickly.

"Get back out of th' light, boys," he said, quietly, and the curious men moved. "Hum . . . I'm a sheepherder, if somebody ain't nicked him in th' arm, boys! I'll be —

"Say, he must of laid on that arm an' stopped th' blood. It's clotted. . . . Oh, damn! It's bleedin' worse. Say, I'll have to get him inside where we can have him fixed up before that breaks open again. Wonder how much he's bled —"

He rose and moved to the door, pulled open the screen quickly. He made one step across the threshold

and then paused between strides, for before him in the darkness of the hallway a woman's face stood out like a cameo. It was white, made whiter by the few feeble rays of the light outside that struggled into the entry; the eyes were great, dark splotches, the lips were parted; one hand was at the chin and about the whole suggested posture of her body was a tensivity, an anxiety, a helplessness that startled the man . . . that, and her beauty. For a moment they stood so, face to face, the one in silhouette, the other in black and white; the one surprised, only, but the other shrinking in terror.

"I . . . he. . . ."

Then, giving no articulate coherence to the idea that was in his mind, Bruce Bayard stepped through the doorway to his left and entered the office, as though he had not seen the woman at all. He looked about, returned to the hallway, gazed almost absently at the stairway where he had seen that troubled countenance and which was now a blank, hesitated a moment and stepped out to join the others.

"I heard somebody shoot, when we was comin' up from th' depot," someone was saying when Bayard broke in:

"Nobody here. Anybody seen Charley?"

"Here's his dad," Clary said, as a fat, wheezing man made his way importantly into the group.

"Uncle, I want to get a room," Bayard said, "to take this here man to so I can wash him up an' look after his arm. He's been shot. I passed Doc

on th' road goin' out when I come in, so I'll just try my hand as a veterinary myself. Can you fix me up?"

"All right! Right here! Bring him in. I've got a room; a nice dollar room," the man wheezed as he stumped into the building. "No disturbance, mind, but I've got a room . . . dollar room . . ."—and the screen door slapped shut behind him.

"He won't die on you, Bruce," the man with a moustache said, straightening, after inspecting the ragged, dirt-filled wound, and laughing lightly. "It just stung him a little. There's a lot of disorderly conduct left in him yet, an' it's a wonder he ain't been ventilated before."

"Yeah. . . . Well, we'll take him up and look him over," Bayard said, his face serious, and stooped to gather the burden in his arms.

"Want any help, Bruce?" Tommy asked.

"Not on this trip, thanks. A good sleep and a stiff cussin' out 'll help a little I guess. Mebbe he's learnt a lesson an' he may go back home an' behave himself."

He shouldered open the screen door and, led by the wheezing landlord who carried a lamp at a reckless angle in his trembling hand, started clumping up the resounding stairway, while the group that had been about the lamp-post drifted off into the darkness. Only the sorrel horse, Abe, remained, bridle-reins down, one hip slumped, great, intelligent eyes watching occasional figures that passed, ears moving to catch the scattered sounds that went up toward the Arizona stars.

CHAPTER III

THE LODGER NEXT DOOR

"Now, this is fine, Uncle," Bayard said, as he stood erect and surveyed the lax body he had deposited on the bed.

His great height made the low, tiny room seem lower, smaller, and in the pale lamplight the fat hotel proprietor peered up into his face with little greedy green eyes, chewing briskly with his front teeth, scratch-the fringe of red whiskers speculatively.

"Well, Bayard, you're all right," he blurted out, huskily, as if he had reached that decision only after lengthy debate. "Th' room 's a dollar, but I'll wait till mornin' as a favor to you. I wouldn't trust most cowboys, but your reputation's gild-edged, fine!"

"Thanks! Seein' nobody's around to overhear, I'll take a chance an' return th' compliment."

And as the other, turning in the doorway, looked back to determine, if he could, the meaning of that last remark, Bayard stooped and gingerly lifted the wounded forearm from which the sleeve had been rolled back.

"What a lookin' human bein'!" he whispered slowly, a moment later, shaking his head and letting

his whole-hearted disgust find expression in deep lines about his mouth, as he scanned the bloated, bruised, muddled face below him. "You've got just about as low down, Pardner, as anybody can get! Lord, that face of yourn would scare the Devil himself . . . even if it is his own work!"

He kicked out of his chaps, flung off jumper and vest, rolled up his sleeves and, turning to the rickety washstand, sloshed water into the bowl from the cracked pitcher and vigorously applied lather to his hands and forearms. From the next room came the sounds of a person moving; the creak of a board, the tinkle of a glass, even the low brushing of a garment being hung on a hook, for the partitions were of inch boards covered only by wallpaper.

"Th' privacies of this here establishment ain't exactly perfect, are they?" the man asked, raising his voice and smiling. "I've got a friend here who needs to have things done for him an' he may wake up and object, but it ain't nothin' serious so don't let us disturb your sleep any more'n you can help," he added and paused, stooped over, to listen for an answer.

None came; no further sound either; the person in the other room seemed to be listening, too. Bayard, after the interval of silence, shrugged his shoulders, filled the bowl with clean water, placed it on a wooden-bottomed chair which held the lamp and sat down on the edge of the bed with soap and towels beside him.

"I'll wash out this here nick, first," he muttered.

"Then, I'll scrub up that ugly mug . . . Ugh!" He made a wry face as he again looked at the distorted, smeared countenance.

He bathed the forearm carefully, then centered his attention on the wound.

"Ho-ho! Went deeper than I thought. . . . Full of dirt an' . . . clot . . . an'. . . ."

He stopped his muttering and left off his bathing of the wound suddenly and clamped his fingers above the gash, for, as he had washed away the clotted blood and caked dirt, a thin, sharp stream of blood had spurted out from the ragged tear in the flesh.

"He got an artery, did he? Huh! When you dropped, you laid on that arm or you'd be eatin' breakfast to-morrow in a place considerable hotter than Arizona," Bayard muttered.

He looked about him calculatingly as though wondering what was best to do first, and the man on the bed stirred uneasily.

"Lay still, you!"

The other moaned and squirmed and threatened to jerk his arm free.

"You don't amount to much, Pardner, but I can't hold you still and play doctor by myself if . . .

"Say, friend,"—raising his voice. "You, in th' next room; would you mind comin' in here a minute? I've took down more rope than I handle right easy."

He turned his head to listen better and through the thin partition came again the sound of movements.

Feet stepped quickly, lightly, on the noisy floor; a chair was shoved from one place to another, a door opened, the feet came down the hall, the door of the room in which Bayard waited swung back . . . and Ann Lytton stood in the doorway.

For a moment their eyes held on one another. The woman's lips were compressed, her nostrils dilated in excitement, her blue eyes wide and apprehensive, although she struggled to repress all these evidences of emotional disturbance. The man's jaw slacked in astonishment, then tightened, and his chest swelled with a deep breath of pleased surprise; he experienced a strange tremor and subconsciously he told himself that she was as rare looking as he had thought she must be from the impression he had received down in the dark hallway.

"Why . . . why, I didn't think you . . . it might be a lady in there, Miss," he said in slow astonishment. "I thought it was a man . . . because ladies don't often get in here. I . . . this is a nasty mess an' maybe you better not tackle it . . . if . . . if you could call somebody to help me . . . Nora, th' girl downstairs, would come, Miss —"

"I can help you," she said, and a flush rushed into her cheeks, which at once relieved and accentuated their pallor. It was as though he had accused her of a weakness that she resented.

Bayard looked her over through a silent moment; then moved one foot quickly and, eyes still holding her

gaze, his left hand groped for a towel, found it, shook it out and spread it over the face of the drunken, wounded man he had called her to help him tend.

"He ain't a beauty, Miss," he explained, relieved that the countenance was concealed from her. "I hate to look at him myself an' I'd hate to have a girl . . . like you have to look at him . . . I'm sure he would, too,"—as though he did not actually mean the last.

The woman moved to his side then, eyes held on the wound by evident effort. It was as if she were impelled to turn her gaze to that covered face and fought against the desire with all the will she could muster.

"You see, Miss, this artery's been cut an' I've got my thumb shut down on it here," he indicated. "This gent got shot up a trifle to-night an' we—you an' me—have got to fix him up. I can't do it alone because he's bleedin' an' he's lost more than's healthy for him now.

"It sure is fine of you to come, Miss."

He looked at her curiously and steadily yet without giving offense. It was as though he had characterized this woman for himself, was thinking more about the effect on her of the work they were to do than of that work itself. He was interested in this newcomer; he wanted to know about her. That was obvious. He watched her as he talked and his manner made her know that he was very gentle, very considerate of her peace of mind, in spite of the quality about him which she could not understand, which was his desire to know

how she would act in this unfamiliar, trying situation.

"Now, you take that towel and roll it up," he was saying. "Yes, th' long way. . . . Then, bring that stick they use to prop up th' window —"

"It's a tourniquet you want," she broke in.

He looked up at her again.

"Tourniquet. . . . Tourniquet," he repeated, to fix the new word in his mind. "Yes, that's what I want: to shut off the blood."

She folded the towel and brought the stick. From her audible breathing Bayard knew that she was excited, but, otherwise, she had ceased to give indication of the fact.

"Loop it around and tie a knot," he said.

"Is that right?" she asked, in a voice that was too calm, too well controlled for the circumstances.

"Yes, it's all right, Miss. How about you?" — a twinkle in his eye. "If this . . . if you don't think you can stand it to fuss with him —" he began, but she cut him off with a look that contained something of a quality of reassurance, but which was more obviously a rebuff.

"I said I could help you. Why do you keep doubting me?"

"I don't; I'm tryin' to be careful of your feelings," — averting his eyes that she might not see the quick fire of appreciation in them. "Will you tighten it with that stick, now, Miss?"

The man on the bed breathed loudly, uncouthly, with

now and then a short, sharp moan. The sour smell of stale liquor was about him; the arm and hand that had been washed were the only clean parts of his body.

"Now you twist it," Bayard said, when she was ready, although he could have done it easily with his free hand.

She grasped the stick with determination and, as she turned it quickly to take up the slack in the loop, Bayard leaned back, part of his weight on the elbow which kept the legs of the unconscious man from threshing too violently as the contrivance shut down on his arm. His attention, however, was not for their patient; it was centered on the girl's hands as they manipulated stick and towel. They were the smallest hands, the trimmest, he had ever seen. The fingers were incredibly fine-boned and about them was a nicety, a finish, that was beyond his experience; yet, they were not weak hands; rather, competent looking. He watched their quick play, the spring of the tendons in her white wrist and, with a new interest, detected a smooth white mark about the third finger of her left hand where a ring had been. He looked into her intent face again, wondering what sort of ring that had been and why it was no longer there; then, forgot all about it in seeing the tight line of her mouth and finding delight in the splendid curve of her chin.

"You hate to do it," he thought, "but you're goin' to see it through!"

"There!" she said, under her breath. "Is that tight enough?"

He looked quickly away from her face to the wound and released the pressure of his thumb.

"Not quite. It oozes a little."

He liked the manner in which she moved her head forward to indicate her resolve, when she forced the cloth even more tightly about the arm. The injured man cried aloud and sought to roll over, and Bayard saw the girl's mouth set in a firmer cast, but in other ways she bore herself as if there had been no sound or movement to frighten or disturb her.

"That'll do," he told her, watching the result of the pressure carefully. "Now, would you tear that pillow slip into strips wide enough for a bandage?" She shook the pillow from the casing. "That'll tickle Uncle, downstairs," he added. "It's worth two bits, but he can charge me a dollar for it."

She did not appear to hear this last; just went on tearing strips with hands that trembled ever so little and his gray eyes lighted with a peculiar fire. Weakness was present in her, the weakness of inexperience, brought on by the sight of blood, the presence of a strange man of a strange type, the proximity of that muttering, filthy figure with his face shrouded from her; but, behind that weakness, was an inherent strength, a determination that made her struggle with all her faculties to hide its evidences; and that courage

was the quality which Bayard had sought in her. Only, he could not then appreciate its true proportions.

"Is this enough?" she asked.

"Plenty. I can manage alone now, if —"

"But I might as well help you through with this!"

She had again detected his doubt of her, discerned his motive in giving her an avenue of graceful escape from the unpleasant situation; she thought that he still mistrusted her stamina and her stubborn refusal to give way to any weakness set the words on her lips to cut him short.

"Well, if you want to," he said, soberly, "you can keep this thing tight, while I wash this hole out an' bind it up. . . . I wouldn't look at it, if I was you; you ain't used to it, you know."

He looked her in the eye, on that last advice, for a moment. She understood fully and, as she took the stick in her hand to keep the blood flow checked, she averted her face. For a breath he looked at the stray little hairs about the depression at the back of her neck. Then, to his work.

He was gentle in cleansing the wound, but he could not touch the raw flesh without giving pain and still accomplish his end, and, on the first pressure of his fingers, the man writhed and twitched and jerked at the arm, drawing his knees up spasmodically.

"I'll have to set on him, Miss," Bayard said.

He did so, straddling the man's thighs and leaning to the right, close against the woman's stooping body. He grasped the cold wrist with one hand and washed the jagged hurt quickly, thoroughly. The man he held protested inarticulately and struggled to move about. Once, the towel that hid his face was thrown off and Bayard replaced it, glad that the girl's back had been turned so she did not see.

It was the crude, cruel surgery of the frontier and once, towards the end, the tortured man lifted his thick, scarcely human voice in a cursing phrase and Bayard, glancing sharply at the woman, murmured,

"I beg your pardon, Miss . . . for him."

"That's not necessary," she answered, and her whisper was thin, weak.

"You ain't goin' to faint, are you?" he asked, in quick apprehension, ceasing his work to peer anxiously at her.

"No. . . . No, but hurry, please; it is very unpleasant."

He nodded his head in assent and began the bandaging, hurriedly. He made the strips of cloth secure with deft movements and then said,

"There, Miss, it's all over!"

She straightened and turned from him and put a hand quickly to her forehead, drew a deep breath as of exasperation and moved an uncertain step or two toward the door.

"All right," she said, with a half laugh, stopping and

turning about. "I was afraid . . . you see! I'm not accustomed. . . ."

Bayard removed his weight from the other man and sat again on the edge of the bed.

"Lots of men, men out here in this country, would have felt the same way . . . only worse," he said, reassuringly. "It takes lots of sand to fuss with blood an' man meat until you get used to it. You've got the sand, Miss, an' I sure appreciate what you've done. He will, too."

She turned to meet his gaze and he saw that her face was colorless and strained, but she smiled and asked,

"I couldn't do less, could I?"

"You couldn't do more," he said, staring hard at her, giving the impression that his mind was not on what he was saying. "More for me or more for . . . a carcass like that." A tremor of anger was in his voice, and resentment showed in his expression as he turned to look at the covered face of the heavily breathing man. "It's a shame, Miss, to make your kind come under the same roof with a . . . a thing like he is!"

After a moment she asked,

"Is he so very bad, then?"

"As bad as men get . . . and the best of us are awful sinful."

"Do you . . . do you think men ever get so bad that anyone can be hurt by being . . . by coming under the same roof with them?"

He shook his head and smiled again.

"I'd say yes, if it wasn't that I'd picked this *hombre* out of th' ditch an' brought him here an' played doctor to-night. You never can tell what you'll believe until the time comes when you've got to believe something."

A silent interval, which the woman broke.

"Is there anything else I can do for you now?"

He knew that she wanted to go, yet some quality about her made him suspect that she wanted to stay on, too.

"No, Miss, nothin' . . . " he answered. "I've got to go tend to my horse. He's such a baby that he won't leave his tracks for anybody so long's he knows I'm here, so I can't send anybody else to look after him. But you've done enough. I'll wait a while till somebody else comes along to watch —"

"No, no! let me stay here . . . with him."

"But —"

"I came here to help you. Won't you let me go through with it?"

He thought again that it was her pride forcing her on; he could not know that the prompting in her was something far deeper, something tragic. He said:

"Why if you want to, of course you can. I won't be gone but a minute. I've let up on this pressure a little; we'll keep letting up on it gradual . . . I've done this thing before. He's got to be watched, though, so he don't pull the bandages off and start her bleeding again."

The woman seated herself on the chair as he turned to go.

"It'll only be a minute," he assured her again, hesitating in the doorway. "I wouldn't go at all, only, when my horse is the kind of a pal he is, I can't let him go hungry. See?"

"I see," she said, but her tone implied that she did not, that such devotion between man and beast was quite incomprehensible . . . or else that she had given his word no heed at all, had only waited impatiently for him to go.

He strode down the hallway and she marked his every footfall, heard him go stumping and ringing down the stairs two at a time, heard him leave the porch and held her breath to hear him say,

"Well, Old Timer, I didn't plan to be so long."

Then, the sound of shod hoofs crossing the street at a gallop.

She closed her eyes and let her head bow slowly and whispered,

"Oh, God . . . there *is* manhood left!"

She sat so a long interval, suffering stamped on her fine forehead, indicated in the pink and white knots formed from her clenched hands. Then, her lips partly opened and she lifted her head and looked long at the covered face of the man on the bed. Her breath was swift and shallow and her attitude that of one who nerves herself for an ordeal. Once, she looked down at the hand on the bed near her and

touched with her own the hardened, soiled fingers, then gave a shake to her head that was almost a shudder, straightened in her chair and muttered aloud,

"He said . . . I had the sand. . . ."

She leaned forward, stretched a hand to the towel which covered the man's face, hesitated just an instant, caught her breath, lifted the shrouding cloth and gave a long, shivering sigh as she sat back in her chair.

At that moment Bruce Bayard in the corral across the street, pulled the bridle over his sorrel's ears. He slung the contrivance on one arm and held the animal's hot, white muzzle in his hands a moment. He squeezed so tightly that the horse shook his head and lifted a fore foot in protest and then, alarmed, backed quickly away.

". . . I didn't intend it, Abe," the man muttered.
". . . I was thinkin' about somethin' else."

CHAPTER IV

A REVELATION

When Bayard returned to the Manzanita House, he ran up the stairs with an eagerness that was not in the least inspired by a desire to return to his watching over the man he had chosen to succor. He strode down the hallway and into the room with his keen anticipation thinly disguised by a sham concern. And within the doorway he halted abruptly, for the woman who had helped him, whose presence there had brought him back from his horse on a run, sat at the bedside with her hands limp in her lap and about her bearing an air that quite staggered him. Her face was as nearly expressionless as a human countenance can become. It was as if something had occurred which had taken from her all emotion, all ability to respond to any mental or sensory influence. For the moment, she was crushed, and so completely that even her reflexes did not react to the horror of the revelation. She did not look at Bayard, did not move; she might have been without the sense of sight or hearing; she did not even breathe perceptibly; just sat there with a fixity that frightened him.

"Why, Miss!" he cried in confused alarm. "I . . . I wouldn't left you —"

She roused on his cry and shook her head, and he thought she wanted him to stop, so he stood there through an awkward moment, waiting for her to say more.

"Course, it was too much for you!" he concluded aloud, self-reproachfully, when she did not speak. "You're tired; this . . . this takin' care of this booze-soaked carcass was too much to ask of you. I —"

"Don't," she said, in a dry, flat voice, looking up at him appealingly, mastering her voice with a heroic effort. "Don't, please! This . . . This booze-soaked . . . carcass . . .

"He is my husband."

The words with which she ended came in a listless whisper; she made no further sound, and the hissing of Bayard's breath, as it slipped out between his teeth, was audible.

All that he had said against that other man came back to him, all the epithets he had used, all the pains he had taken to impress on this woman, his wife, a sense of the utter degradation, the vileness, of Ned Lytton. For the instant, he was filled with regret because of his rash speech; the next, he was overwhelmed by realizing that all he had said was true and that he had been justified in saying those things of this woman's husband. The thought unpoised him.

"I didn't think you was married," he said, slowly,

distinctly, his voice unsteady, scarcely conscious of the fact that he was putting what transpired in his mind into words. "Especially . . . to a thing like that!"

The gesture of his one arm which indicated the prostrate figure was eloquent of the contempt he felt and the posture of his body, bent forward from his hips, was indication of his sincerity. He was so intense emotionally that he could not realize that his last words might lash the suffering woman cruelly. The thought was in him, so strong, so revolting, that it had to come out. He could not have restrained it had he consciously appreciated the hurt that its expression would give the woman.

She stared up at him, her numb brain wondering clumsily at the storm indicated in his eyes, about his mouth, and they held so a moment before she sat back in her chair, weakly, one wrist against her forehead.

"Here, come over by the window . . . never mind him," he said, almost roughly, stepping to her side, grasping her arm and shaking it.

Ten minutes before the careful watching of that unconscious man had been the one important thing of the night, but now it was an inconsequential affair, a bother. Ten minutes before his interest in the woman had been a light, transient fancy; now he was more deeply concerned with her trouble than he ever had been with an affair of his own. He lifted the bandaged arm and placed a pillow beneath it, almost carelessly; then closed the door. He turned about and looked at Ann Lytton,

who had gone to stand by the window, her back to him, face in her hands.

He walked across and halted, towering over her, looking helplessly down at the back of her bowed head. His arms were limp at his sides, until she swayed as though she would fall, and, then, he reached out to support her, grasping her shoulders gently with his big palms; when she steadied, he left his hands so, lifting the right one awkwardly to stroke her shivering shoulder. They stood silent many minutes, the man suffering with the woman, suffering largely because of his inability to bear a portion of her grief. After a time, he forced her about with his hands and, when she had turned halfway around, she lifted her face to look into his. She blinked and strained her eyes open and laughed mirthlessly, then was silent, with the knuckles of her fist pressed tightly against her mouth.

"I am so glad . . . so glad that it was you, . . ." she said, huskily, after a wait in which she mastered herself, the thought that was uppermost in her mind finding the first expression. "I heard you say, down there, that he was a cripple and that . . . that's what he is . . . what I thought. You . . . you understand, don't you? A woman in my place *has* to think something like that!"—in unconscious confession to a weakness. "I heard you say he was a cripple . . . the man you were carrying . . . and I thought it must be Ned, because I've had to think that, too. You understand? Don't you?"

She looked into his eyes with the directness of a pleading child and, gripping her shoulders, he nodded.

"I think I understand, ma'am. I . . . and I hope you can forget all th' mean things I've said about him to-night. I —"

"And when you called me in here," she interrupted, heedless of his attempt at apology, "I was afraid at first, because something told me it was he. I had come all the way from Maine to see him; to find out about him, and I didn't want to blind myself after that. I wanted to know . . . the worst."

"You have, ma'am," he said, grimly, and took his hands from her shoulders and turned away.

"I was afraid it was Ned from the very first, but out there, with those other men around, I . . . couldn't make myself look at him. And after that the suspense was horrible. I was glad when you called me to help you because that made me face it . . . and even knowing what I know now is better in some ways than uncertainty. I . . . I might have dodged, anyhow, if you hadn't made me feel you were trying to find out how far I would go . . . what I would do. Your doubting me made me doubt myself and that . . . that drove me on.

"It took a lot of courage to look at his . . . face. But I had to know. I had to; I'd come all this way to know."

She hesitated, staring absently, and Bayard waited in silence for her to go on.

"It seemed quite natural to hear those men talking about him the way they did, swearing at him and laughing. . . . And then to hear someone protecting him because he is weak,"—with a brave effort at a smile. "That's what people in the East, his own people, even, have done; and I . . . I had to stand up for him when everything, even he, was against me. . . ."

"I'd hoped that out here, at the mine, he'd be different, that he'd behave, that people would come to respect and like him. I'd hoped for that right up to the time I saw you coming across the street with him. I felt it must be he. I hadn't heard from him in months, not a line. That's why I came out here. And I guess that in my heart I'd expected to find him like that. The uncertainty, that was the worst. . . ."

"Peculiar, isn't it, why I should have been uncertain? I should have admitted what I felt intuitively, but I always have hoped, I always will hope that he'll come through it sometime. That hope has kept me from telling myself that it must be the same with him out here as it was back there; that's why I fooled myself until I saw you . . . with him."

"And I'm so glad it happened to be you who picked him up. You understand, you —"

Emotion choked off her words.

Bayard walked from her, returned to the bedside and stared down at the inert figure there. He was in a tumult. The contrast between this man and wife was too dreadful to be comprehended in calm. Lytton was

the lowest human being he had ever known, degenerated to an organism that lived solely to satiate its most unworthy appetites. Ann, the woman crying yonder, was quite the most beautiful creature on whom he had ever looked and, though he had seen her for the first time no more than an hour before, her charm had touched every masculine instinct, had gripped him with that urge which draws the sexes one to another . . . yet, he was not conscious of it. She was, in his eyes, so wonderful, so removed from his world, that he could not presume to recognize her attraction as for himself. She was a distant, unattainable creature, one to serve, to admire; perhaps, sometime, to worship reverently and that was the fact which set the blood congesting in his head when he looked down at the waster for whom she had traveled across a continent that she might suffer like this. Lytton was attainable, was comprehensible, and Bayard was urged to make him suffer in atonement for the wretchedness he had brought to this woman who loved him. . . . Who. . . . *loved* him?

The man turned to look at Ann again, his lower lip caught speculatively between his thumb and forefinger.

"Now, I suppose the thing to do is to plan, to make some sort of arrangements . . . now that I have found him," she said in a strained voice, bracing her shoulders, lifting a hand to brush a lock of hair back from her white, blue-veined temple.

She smiled courageously at the cowboy who approached her diffidently.

"I came out here to find out what was going on, to help him if he were succeeding, to . . . help him if . . . as I have found him."

Her directness had returned and, as she spoke, she looked Bayard in the eye, steadily.

"Well, whatever I can do, ma'am, I'm anxious to do," he said, repressing himself that he might not give ground to the suspicion that he was forcing himself on her, though his first impulse was to take her affairs in hand and shield her from the trying circumstances which were bound to follow. "I can't do much to help you, but all I can do —"

"I don't think I could do anything without you," she said, simply, letting her gaze travel over his big frame. "It's so far away, out here, from anyone I know or the things I am accustomed to. It's . . . it's too wonderful, finding someone out here who understands Ned, when even his own people back home didn't. I wonder . . . is it asking too much to ask you to help me plan? You know people and conditions. I don't."

She made the request almost timidly, but he leaped at the opportunity and cried:

"If I can help you, if I could be of use to you, I'd think it was th' finest thing that ever happened to me, ma'am. I've never been of much use to anybody but

myself. I . . . I'd like to help you!" His manner was so wholly boyish that she impulsively put out her hand to him.

"You're kind to me, so. . . ."

She lost the rest of the sentence because of the fierceness with which he grasped her proffered hand and for a moment his gray eyes burned into hers with confusing intensity. Then he straightened and looked away with an inarticulate word.

"Well, what do you want to do?" he asked, stepping to one side to bring a chair for her.

"I don't know; he's in a frightful . . . I've never seen him as bad as this,"—her voice threatening to break.

"An' he'll be that way so long as he's near that!"

He held his hand up in a gesture that impelled her to listen as the notes from the saloon piano drifted into the little room.

"He's pretty far gone, ma'am, your husband. He ain't got a whole lot of strength, an' it takes strength to show will power. We might keep him away from drinkin' by watching him all the time, but that wouldn't do much good; that wouldn't be a cure; it would only be delay, and wasting our time and foolin' ourselves. He'd ought to be took away from it, a long ways away from it."

"That's what I've thought. Couldn't I take him out to the mine —"

"His mine is most forty miles from here, ma'am."

"So much the better, isn't it? We'd be away from all this. I could keep him there, I know."

Bayard regarded her critically until her eyes fell before his.

"You might keep him there, and you might not. I judge you didn't have much control over him in th' East. You didn't seem to have a great deal of influence with him by letter,"—gently, very kindly, yet impressively. "If you got out in camp all alone with him, livin' a life that's new to you, you might not make good there. See what I mean? You'd be all alone, cause the mine's abandoned." She started at that. "There'd be nobody to help you if he got crazy wild like he'll sure get before he comes through. You —"

"You don't think I'm up to it? Is that it?" she interrupted.

He looked closely at her before he answered.

"Ma'am, if a woman like you can't keep a man straight by just lovin' him,"—with a curious flatness in his voice—"you can't do it no way, can you?"

She sat silent, and he continued to question her with his gaze.

"I judge you've tried that way, from what you've told me. You've been pretty faithful on the job. You . . . you *do* love him yet, don't you?" he asked, and she looked up with a catch of her breath.

"I do,"—dropping her eyes quickly.

The man paced the length of the room and back

again as though this confession had altered the case and presented another factor for his consideration. But, when he stopped before her, he only said:

"You can't leave him in town; you can't take him to his mine. There ain't any place away from town I know of where they'd want to be bothered with a sick man," he explained, gravely, evading an expression of the community's attitude toward Lytton. "I might take him to my place. I'm only eight miles out west. I could look after him there, cause there ain't much press of work right now an'—"

"But I would go with him, too, of course," she said. "It's awfully kind of you to offer . . ."

In a flash the picture of this woman and that ruin of manhood together in his house came before Bayard and, again, he realized the tragedy in their contrast. He saw himself watching them, hearing their talk, seeing the woman make love to her debauched husband, perhaps, in an effort to strengthen him; he felt his wrath warm at thought of that girl's devotion and loyalty wasting itself so, and a sudden, alarming distrust of his own patience, his ability to remain a disinterested neutral, arose.

"Do you think he better know you're here?" he asked, inspired, and turned on her quickly.

"Why, why not?"—in surprise.

"It would sure stir him up, ma'am. He ain't even wrote to you, you say, so it would be a surprise for him to see you here. He's goin' to need all the nerve he's

got left, ma'am, 'specially right at first,"—his mind working swiftly to invent an excuse — "Your husband's goin' to have the hardest fight he's ever had to make when he comes out of this. He's on the ragged edge of goin' *loco* from booze now; if he had somethin' more to worry him, he might. . . .

"Besides, my outfit ain't a place for a woman. He can get along because he's lived like we do, but you couldn't. All I got is one room,"—hesitating as if he were embarrassed—"and no comforts for . . . a lady like you, ma'am."

"But my place is with him! That's why I've come here."

"Would your bein' with him help? Could you do anything but stir him up?"

"Why of —"

"Have you ever been able to, ma'am?"

She stopped, unable to get beyond that fact.

"If you ain't, just remember that he's a hundred times worse than he was when you had your last try at him."

She squeezed the fingers of one hand with the other. Her chin trembled sharply but she mastered the threatened breakdown.

"What would you have me do?" she asked, weakly, and at that Bayard swung his arms slightly and smiled at her in relief.

"Can't you stay right here in Yavapai and wait until the worst is over? It won't be so very long."

"I might. I'll try. If you think best . . . I will, of course."

"I'll come in town every time I get a chance and tell you about him," he promised, eagerly. "I'll . . . I'll be glad to," he hastened to add, with a drop in his voice that made her look at him. "Then, when he's better, when he's able to make it around the place on foot, when you think you can manage him, I s'pose you can go off to his mine, then."

He ceased to smile and smote one hip in a manner that told of his sudden feeling of hopelessness. He walked toward the bed again and Ann watched him. As he passed the lamp on the chair, she saw the fine ripple of his thigh muscles under the close-fitting overalls, saw with eyes that did not comprehend at first but which focused suddenly and then scrutinized the detail of his big frame with an odd uneasiness.

He turned on her and said irrelevantly, as if they had discussed the idea at length,

"I'm glad to do it for you, ma'am."

He stared at her steadily, seeming absorbed by the thought of service to her, and the woman, after a moment, removed her gaze from his.

"It's so good of you!" she said, and became silent when he gave her no heed.

So it was arranged that Bayard should take Ned Lytton to his home to nurse and bring him back to bodily health and moral strength, if such accomplishments were possible. The hours passed until night had

ceased to age and day was young before the cowman deemed it wise to move the still sleeping Easterner. He chose to make the drive to his ranch in darkness, rather than wait for daylight when his going would attract attention and set minds speculating and tongues wagging.

Until his departure, the three remained in the room where they had met, Ann much of the time sitting beside her husband, staring before her, Bayard moving restlessly about in the shadows, watching her face and her movements, questioning her occasionally, growing more absorbed in studying the woman, until, during their last hour together, he was in a fever to be away from her where he could think straight of all that had happened since night came to Yavapai.

Before he left he said:

"Probably nobody will ask you questions, but if they do just say that your husband went away before daylight an' that I left after I washed his arm out. That'll be the truth an' what folks don't know won't hurt 'em . . . nor make you uncomfortable by havin' 'em watch you an' do a lot of unnecessary talkin'."

From her window Ann watched Bayard emerge from the doorway below and place the limp figure of his burden on the seat of the buckboard he had secured for the trip home. In the starlight she saw him knot the bridle reins of his sorrel over the saddle horn, heard him say, "Go home, Abe," and saw the splendid beast stride swiftly off into the night alone. Then, the creak

of springs as he, too, mounted the wagon, his word to the horses, the sounds of wheels, and she thought she saw him turn his face toward her window as he rounded the corner of the hotel.

The woman stood a moment in the cold draught of the wind that heralded dawn. It was as though something horrible had gone out of her life and, at the same time, as if something wonderful had come in; only, while the one left the heaviness, the other brought with it a sweet sorrow. Half aloud she told herself that; then cried:

“No, it can't be! Nothing has gone; nothing has come. Things are as they were . . . or worse. . . .”

Then, she turned to her hard, lumpy bed.

CHAPTER V

THE CLERGY OF YAVAPAI

Hours passed before Ann could sleep, and then her slumber was broken, her rest harried by weird dreams, her half-waking periods crammed with disturbing fantasies. When broad daylight came, she rose and drew down the shades of her window and after she had listened to the birds, to the sounds of the awakening town, to the passing of a train, rest came and until nearly noon she slept heavily.

She came to herself possessed by a queer sense of unreality and it was moments before she could determine its source. Then the events of the evening and night swept back to her intelligence and she closed her eyes, feeling sick and worn.

Restlessness came upon her finally and she arose, dressed, went downstairs and forced herself to eat. Several others were in the dining room and two men sat with her at table. She was conscious that the talk, which had been loud, diminished when she entered and that those nearest her were evidently uncomfortable, embarrassed, glad to be through and gone.

When Nora, the waitress, took her order, Ann saw that the girl eyed her curiously, possibly sympatheti-

cally, and, while that quality could not help but rouse an appreciation in her, she shrank from the thought that this whole strange little town was eying her, wondering about her, dissecting her as she suffered in its midst and even through her loyalty to her husband crept a hope that her true identity might remain secret.

She left the table and started for the stairway, when the boy who had given her her room the night before came out of the office. He had not expected to see her. He stopped and flushed and stammered.

"You . . . last night . . . you said you might . . . that is, do you want th' automobile, ma'am?"

"I shan't want to go out to-day," Ann answered him, forcing her voice to steadiness. "I have changed my mind."

Then, she went swiftly up the stairs.

She knew that the youth knew at least a part of her reason for altering her plans. She knew that within the hour all Yavapai would know that she was not going to the Sunset mine because Ned Lytton was drunk and hurt, and she felt like crying aloud to relieve the distress in her heart.

Her room was hot, its smallness was unbearable and, putting on her hat, she went down the stairs, out of the hotel and, looking up and down the main street, struck off to the left, for that direction seemed to offer the quickest exit from the town.

Ann walked swiftly along the hard highway, head down until she had left the last buildings behind.

Then she lifted her chin and drew a deep breath of the fine mountain air and for the first time realized the immensity of the surrounding country. Sight of it brought a little gasp of wonder from her and she halted and turned slowly to look about.

The town was set in the northern edge of a huge valley which appeared to head in abruptly rising hills not so far to the westward. But to the south and eastward it swept on and out, astonishing in its apparent smoothness, its lavish colorings. Northward, its rise was more decided and not far from the town clumps of brush and scant low timber dotted the country, but out yonder there appeared to be no growth except the grass which, where it grew in rank patches, bowed before the breeze and flashed silver under the brilliant sun. The distances were blue and inviting. She felt as though she would like to start walking and walk and walk, alone under that high blue sky.

She strolled on after that and followed the wagon track an hour. Then, bodily weariness asserted itself and she rested in the shade of a low oak scrub, twining grass stalks with nervous fingers.

"I would have said that a country like this would have inspired anybody," she said aloud after a time. "But he's the same. He's small, he's small!"

Vindictiveness was about her and her tone was bitter.

"Still," she thought, "it may not be too late. That other man . . . is as big as this . . ."

When she had rested and risen and gone a half mile back toward Yavapai, she repeated aloud:

"As big as this. . . ."

A great contrast that had been! Bruce Bayard, big, strong, controlled, clean and thinking largely and clearly; Ned Lytton, little, weak, victim of his appetites, foul and selfish. She wondered rather vaguely about Bayard. Was he of that country? Was he the lover of some mountain girl? Was he, possibly, the husband? No, she recalled that he had said that he lived alone. . . . Well, so did she, for that matter!

Scraps of Bayard's talk the night before came back to her and she pondered over them, twisting their meanings, wondering if she had been justified in the relief his assurances gave her. There, alone in the daylight, they all seemed very incredible that she should have opened her heart, given her dearest confidences to that man. As she thought back through the hour, she became a trifle panicky, for she did not realize then that to have remained silent, to have bottled her emotions within herself longer would have been disastrous; she had reached Yavapai and the breaking point at the same hour, and, had not Bayard opportunely encountered her, she would have been forced to talk to the wheezing hotel proprietor or Nora, the waitress, or the first human being she met on the street . . . someone, anyone! Then, abruptly changing her course of thought, she reminded herself of the strangeness of the

truth that not once had it occurred to her to worry over the fact that her husband, in an unconscious condition, had been taken away, she knew not where, by this stranger. The faith she had felt in Bayard from the first prevailed. She faced the future with forebodings; about the present condition of Ned Lytton she did not dare think. A comforting factor was the conviction that everything was being done for him that she could do and more . . . for she always had been helpless.

She breathed in nervous exasperation at the idea that everything she saw, talked about, thought or experienced came back to impress her further with the hopelessness of the situation, then told herself that fretting would not help; that she must do her all to make matters over, that she must make good her purpose in coming to this new place.

As she neared the town again, she saw the figure of a man approaching. He walked slowly, with head down, and his face was wholly shaded by the broad brim of his felt hat. His hands were behind his back and the aimlessness of his carriage gave evidence of deep thought.

When the woman was about to pass him, he turned back toward town without looking up and it was the scuffing of her shoe that attracted him. He faced about quickly at the sound and stared hard at Ann. The stare was not offensive. She saw first his eyes, black and large and wonderfully kind; his hair was

white; his shaven lips gentle. Then she observed that he wore the clothing of a clergyman.

His hand went to his hat band, after his first gaze at her, and he smiled.

"How-do-you-do?" he said, with friendly confidence.

Ann murmured a greeting.

"I didn't know anyone was on the road. I was thinking rather fiercely, I guess."

He started to walk beside her and Ann was glad, for he was of that type whose first appearance attracts by its promise of friendship.

"I've been thinking, too," she answered. "Thinking, among other things what a wonderful country this is. I'm from the East, I suppose it is not necessary to say, and this is my first look at your valley."

"Manzanita is a great old sweep of country!" he exclaimed, looking out over it. "That valley is a good thing to look at when we think that human anxieties are mighty matters."

He smiled, and Ann looked into his face with a new interest and said:

"I should think that such an influence as this is would tend to lessen those anxieties; that it would tend to make the people who live near it big, as it is big."

He looked away and shook his head slowly.

"I hold that theory, too, sometimes . . . in my most optimistic hours. But the more I see of the places in which men live, the closer I watch the way

we humans react to our physical environments, the less faith I have in it. Some of the biggest, rarest souls I know have developed in the meanest localities and, on the other hand, some of the worst culls of the species I've ever seen have been products of countries so big that they would inspire most men. Perhaps, though, the big men of the small places would have been bigger in a country like this; possibly, those who are found wanting out here would fall even shorter of what we expect of them if they were in less wonderful surroundings."

He paused a moment and then continued: "It may be a myth, this tradition of the bigness of mountain men; or the impression may thrive because, out here, we are so few and so widely scattered that we are the only people who get a proper perspective on one another. That would be a comfortable thing to believe, wouldn't it? It would mean, possibly, that if we could only remove ourselves far enough from any community we would appreciate its virtues and be able to overlook its vices. I'd like to believe without qualification that a magnificent creation like this valley would lift us all to a higher level; but I can't. Some of your enthusiastic young men who come out from the East and write books about the West would have it that these specimens of humanity which thrive in the mountains and deserts are all supermen, with only enough rascals sprinkled about to serve the purposes of their plots. That, of course, is a fallacy and it may be due to the

surprising point of view which we find ourselves able to adopt when we are removed far enough by distance or tradition from other people. We have some splendid men here, but the average man in the mountains won't measure up to where he will overshadow the average man of any other region . . . I believe. We haven't so many opportunities, perhaps, to show our qualities of goodness and badness . . . although some of us can be downright nasty on occasion!"

He ended with an inflection which caused Ann to believe that he was thinking of some specific case of misconduct; she felt herself flush quickly and became suddenly fearful that he might refer directly to Ned. Last night she had poured her misery into a stranger's ears; to-day she could not bear the thought of further discussing her husband's life or condition; she shrank, even, from the idea of being associated with him in the minds of other people and in desperation she veered the subject by asking,

"Is it populated much, the valley, I mean?"

"Not yet. Cattle and horse and some sheep ranches are scattered about. One outfit will use up a lot of that country for grazing purposes, you know. Someday there'll be water and more people . . . and less bigness!"

He told her more of the valley, stopping now and then to indicate directions.

"I came from over there yesterday," he said, facing about and pointing into the westward. "Had a

funeral beyond those hills. Stopped for dinner with a young friend of mine whose ranch is just beyond that swell yonder. . . . Fine boy; Bayard, Bruce Bayard."

Ann wanted to ask him more about the rancher, but somehow she could not trust herself; she felt that her voice would be uncertain, for one thing. Some unnamed shyness, too, held her from questioning him now.

They stopped before the hotel and the man said:

"My name is Weyl. I am the clergy of Yavapai. If you are to be here long, I'm sure Mrs. Weyl would like to see you. She is in Prescott for a week or two now."

He put out his hand, and, as she clasped it, Ann said, scarcely thinking:

"I am Ann Lytton. I arrived last night and may be here some time."

She saw a quick look of pain come into his readable eyes and felt his finger tighten on hers.

"Oh, yes!" he said, in a manner that made her catch her breath. "I know. . . . Your brother, isn't it, the young miner?"

At that the woman started and merely to escape further painful discussion, unthinkingly clouding her own identity, replied,

"Ned, you mean . . . yes. . . ."

"Well, if you're to be here long we will see you, surely. And if there's anything I can do for you, please ask it."

"You're very kind," she said, as she turned from him.

In her room she stood silent a moment, palms against her cheeks. Bayard's words came back to her:

"I didn't think you was married . . . especially to a thing like that. . . ."

And now this other man concluded that she could not be Ned's wife!

"I must be his wife . . . his *good* wife!" she said, with a stamp of her foot. "If he ever needed one . . . it's now. . . ."

CHAPTER VI

AT THE CIRCLE A

Ned Lytton swam back to consciousness through painful half dreams. Light hurt his inflamed eyes; a horrible throbbing, originating in the center of his head, proceeded outward and seemed to threaten the solidity of his skull; his body was as though it had been mauled and banged about until no inch of flesh remained unbruised; his left forearm burned and stung fiendishly. He was in bed, undressed, he realized, and covered to the chin with clean smelling bedding. He moved his tortured head from side to side and marveled dully because it rested on a pillow.

It was some time before he appreciated more. Then he saw that the fine sunlight which hurt his eyes streamed into the room from open windows and door, that it was flung back at him by whitewashed walls and scrubbed floor. He was in someone's house, cared for without his knowing. He moved stiffly on the thought. Someone had taken him in, someone had shown him a kindness, and, even in his semi-stupor, he wondered, because, for an incalculable period, he had been hating and hated.

He did not know how Bayard had dragged a bed from another room and set it up in his kitchen that he

might better nurse his patient; did not know how the rancher had slept in his chair, and then but briefly, that he might not be tardy in attending to any need during the early morning hours; did not realize that the whole program of life in that comfortable ranch house had been altered that it might center about him. He did comprehend, though, that someone cared, that he was experiencing kindness.

The sound of moving feet and the ring of spurs reached him; then a boot was set on the threshold and Bruce Bayard stepped into the room. He was rubbing his face with a towel and in the other hand was a razor and shaving brush. He had been scraping his chin in the shade of the ash tree that waved lazily in the warm breeze and tossed fantastically changing shadows through the far window. He looked up as he entered and encountered the gaze from these swollen, inflamed eyes set in the bruised face of Ned Lytton.

"Hello!" he cried in surprise. "You're awake?"

He put down the things he carried and crossed the room to the bedside.

"Yes. . . . For God's sake, haven't you got a drink?"—in a painful rasp.

"I have; one; just one, for you," the other replied, left the room and came back with a tumbler a third filled with whiskey. He propped Lytton's head with one hand and held the glass to his misshapen lips, while he guzzled greedily.

"More . . . another . . ." Lytton muttered a moment after he was back on his pillow.

"Seems to me you'd ought to know you've punished enough of this by now," the rancher said, standing with his hands on his hips and looking at the distorted expression of suffering on Lytton's face.

The sick man moved his head slightly in negation. Then, after a moment:

"How'd I get here? Who are you . . . anyhow?"

"Don't you know me?"

The fevered eyes held on him, studying laboriously, and a smile struggled to bend the puffed lips.

"Sure . . . you're the fellow, Nora's fellow . . . the girl in the hotel. I tried to . . . and she said you'd beat me up. . . ." Something intended for a laugh sounded from his throat. The face of the man above him flushed slightly and the jaw muscles bulged under his cheek. "Where in hell am I? How'd I get here?"

"I brought you here last night. You'd gone the limit in town. Somebody tried to shoot you an' got as far 's your arm. I brought you here to try to make somethin' like a man of you,"—ending with a hint of bitterness in spite of the whimsical smile with which he watched the effect of his last words.

Lytton stirred.

"Damned arm!" he muttered, thickly, evidently conscious of only physical things. "I thought some-

thing was wrong. It hurts like. . . . Say, whatever your name is, haven't you got another drink?"

"My name is Bayard; you know me when you're sober. You're at my ranch, th' Circle A. You've had your drink for to-day."

"May — Bayard. Say, for God's sake, Bayard, you ain't going to let me. . . . Why, like one gentleman to another, when your girl Nora, the waitress . . . said you'd knock me . . . keep away. I wasn't afraid. . . . Didn't know she was yours. . . . I quit when I knew. . . . Treated you like a gentleman. Now why . . . don't you treat me like a gentle . . . give me a drink. I kept away from your wo —"

"Oh, shut up!"

The ominous quality of the carelessly spoken, half laughing demand carried even to Lytton's confused understanding and he checked himself between syllables, staring upward into the countenance of the other.

"In the first place, she's not my woman, in th' way you mean; if she was, I wouldn't stand here an' only tell you to shut your mouth when you talked about her like that. Sick as you are, I'd choke you, maybe. In th' second place, I'm no gentleman, I guess," — with a smile breaking through into a laugh. "I'm just a kind of he-man an' I don't know much about th' way you gentlemen have dealin's with each other.

"No more booze for you to-day. Get that in your head, if you can. I've got coffee for you now an' some soup."

He turned and walked to the stove in the far corner, kicked open the draft and took a cup from the shelf above. All the while the bleared, scarce understanding gaze of the man in bed followed him as though he were trying to comprehend, trying to get the meaning of Bayard's simple, direct sentences.

After he had been helped in drinking a quantity of hot coffee and had swallowed a few spoonfuls of soup, Lytton dropped back on the pillow, sighed and, with his puffed eyes half open, slipped back into a state that was half slumber, half stupor.

Bayard took the wounded arm from beneath the cover, unwrapped the bandages, eyed the clotted tear critically and bound it up again. Then he walked to the doorway and, with hands hooked in his belt, scowled out across the lavender floor of the treeless valley which spread before and below him, rising to blue heights in the far, far distance. He stood there a long, silent interval, staring vacantly at that vast panorama, then, moved slowly across the fenced dooryard, let himself into a big enclosure and approached a round corral, through the bars of which the sorrel horse watched his progress with alert ears. For a half hour he busied himself with currycomb and brush, rubbing the fine hair until the sunlight was shot back from it in points of golden light and all the time the frown between his brows grew deeper, more perplexed. Finally, he straightened, tapped the comb against a post to free it of dust, flung an arm affectionately about

the horse's neck, caressed one of the great, flat cheeks, idly, and, after a moment, began to laugh.

"Because we set our fool eyes on beauty in distress we cross a jag-cure with a reform school an' set up to herd th' cussed thing!" he chuckled. "Abe, was there ever two bigger fools 'n you an' me? Because she's a beauty, she'll draw attention like honey draws bees; because she's in trouble an' can't hide it, she'll have everybody prospectin' round to locate her misery an' when they do, we'll be in th' middle of it all, keepin' th' worthless husband of a pretty young woman away from her. All out of th' goodness of our hearts. It won't sound good when they talk about it an' giggle, Abe. It won't sound good!" And then, very seriously,

"How 'n hell could she marry a . . . thing like that?"

During the day Lytton roused several times and begged for whiskey, incoherently, scarce consciously, but only once again did Bayard respond with stimulants. That was late evening and, after the drink, the man dropped off into profound slumber, not to rouse from it until the sun again rose above the hills and once more flooded the room with its glorious light. Then, he looked up to see Bayard smiling seriously at him, a basin and towel in his hands.

"You're a good sleeper," he said. "I took a look at your pinked arm an' you didn't even move; just cussed me a little."

The other smiled, this time in a more human manner, for the swelling had partly gone from his lips and his eyes were nearer those of his species.

"Now, sit up," the cowman went on, "an' get your face washed, like a good boy."

Gently, swiftly, thoroughly, he washed Lytton's face and neck in water fresh from the well under the ash tree, and, when he had finished, he took the sick man in the crook of his big, steady arm, lifted him without much effort and placed him halfway erect against the re-arranged pillows.

"Would you eat somethin'?" he asked, and for the first time that day his patient spoke.

"Lord, yes! I'm starved,"—feebly.

Bayard brought coffee again and eggs and stood by while Lytton consumed them with a weak show of relish. During this breakfast only a few words were exchanged, but when the dishes were removed and Bayard returned to the bed with a glass of water the other stared into his face for the space of many breaths.

"Old chap, you're mighty white to do all this," he said, and his voice trembled with earnestness. "I . . . I don't believe I've ever spoken to you a dozen times when I was sober and yet you. . . . How long have you been doing all this for me?"

"Only since night before last," Bayard answered, with a depreciating laugh. "It's no more 'n any

man would do for another . . . if he needed it."

Lytton searched his face seriously again.

"Oh, yes, it is," he muttered, with a painful shake of his head. "No one has ever done for me like this, never since I was a little kid. . . .

"I . . . I don't blame 'em; especially the ones out here. I've been a rotter all right; no excuse for it. I . . . I've gone the limit and I guess whoever tried to shoot me was justified . . . I don't know,"—with a slow sigh—"how much hell I've raised.

"But . . . but why did you do this for me? You've never seen me much; never had any reason to like me."

The smile went from Bayard's eyes. He thought "I'm doing this not for you, but for a woman I've seen only once. . . ." What he said aloud was: "Why, I reckoned if somebody didn't take care of you, you'd get killed up. I might just as well do it as anybody an' save Yavapai th' trouble of a funeral."

They looked at one another silently.

"A while ago . . . yesterday, maybe . . . I said something to you about a, about a woman," the man said, and an uneasiness marked his expression. "I apologize, Old Man. I don't know just what I said, but I was nasty, and I'm sorry. A . . . a man's woman is his own affair; nobody's else."

"You think so?" The question came with a surprising bluntness.

"Why, yes; always."

Bayard turned from the bedside abruptly and strode across the floor to the table where a pan waited for the dirty dishes, rolling up his sleeves as he went, face troubled. Lytton's eyes followed him, a trifle sadly at first, but slowly, as the other worked, a cunning came into them, a shiftiness, a crafty glitter. He moistened his lips with his tongue and stirred uneasily on his pillow. Once, he opened his mouth as though to speak but checked the impulse. When the dishpan was hung away and Bayard stood rolling down his sleeves, Lytton said:

"Old man, yesterday you gave me a drink or two. Can't . . . haven't you any left this morning?"

"I have," the rancher said slowly, "but you don't need it to-day. You did yesterday, but this mornin' you've got some grub in you, you got somethin' more like a clear head, an' I don't guess any snake juice would help matters along very fast. There's more coffee here an' you can fill up on that any old time you get shaky."

"Coffee!" scoffed the other, a sudden weak rage asserting itself. "What th' hell do I want of coffee? What I need 's whiskey! Don't you think I know what I want? Lord, Bayard, I'm a man, ain't I? I can judge for myself what I want, can't I?"

"Yesterday, you said you was a gentleman," Bayard replied, reminiscently, his tone lightly chaffing, "an' I guess that about states your case. As for you knowin'

what you want . . . I don't agree with you; judgin' from your past, anyhow."

The man in the bed bared his teeth in an unpleasant smile; two of the front teeth were missing, another broken, result of some recent fight, and with his swollen eyes he was a revolting sight. As he looked at him, Bayard's face reflected his deep disgust.

"What's your game?" Lytton challenged. "I didn't ask you to bring me here, did I? I haven't asked any favors of you, have I? You . . . You shanghaied me out to your damned ranch; you keep me here, and then won't even give me a drink out of your bottle. Hell, any sheepherder 'd do that for me!

"If you think I'm ungrateful for what you've done — sobered me up, I mean — just say so and I'll get out. That was all right. But what was your object?"

"I thought by bringing you out here you might get straightened up. I did it for your own good. You don't understand right now, but you may . . . sometime."

"My own good! Well, I've had enough for my own good, now, so I guess I won't wait any longer to understand!"

He kicked off the covers and stood erect, swaying dizzily. Bayard stepped across to him.

"Get back into bed," he said, evenly, with no display of temper. "You couldn't walk to water an' you

couldn't set on a horse five minutes. You're here an' you're goin' to stay a while whether you like it or not."

The cords of his neck stood out, giving the only evidence of the anger he felt. He gently forced the other man back into bed and covered him, breathing a trifle swiftly but offering no further protest for explanation.

"You keep me here by force, and then you prate about doing it for my own good!" Lytton panted. "You damned hypocrite; you. . . . It's on account of a woman, I know! She tried to get coy with me; she tried to make me think she was all yours when I followed her up. She told you about it and . . . damn you, you're afraid to let me go back to town!"—lifting himself on an elbow. "Come, Bayard, be frank with me: the thing between us is a woman, isn't it?"

The rancher eyed him a long time, almost absently. Then he walked slowly to the far corner of the room and moved a chair back against the wall with great pains; it was as though he were deciding something, something of great importance, something on which an immediate decision was gravely necessary. He faced about and walked slowly back to the bedside without speaking. His lips were shut and the one hand held behind him was clenched into a knot.

"Not now . . . a woman," he said, as though he were uncertain himself. "Not now . . . but it may be, sometime. . . ."

The other laughed and fell back into his pillows.

Bayard looked down at him, eyes speculative beneath slightly drawn brows.

"And then," he added, "if it ever comes to that . . ."

He snapped his fingers and turned away abruptly, as if the thought brought a great uneasiness.

CHAPTER VII

TONGUES WAG

It was afternoon the next day that Bruce Bayard, swinging down from his horse, whipped the dust from his clothing with his hat and walked through the kitchen door of the Manzanita House.

"Hello, Nora," he said to the girl who approached him. "Got a little clean water for a dirty cow puncher?"

He kicked out of his chaps and, dropping his hat to the floor, reached for the dipper. The girl, after a brief greeting, stood looking at him in perplexed speculation.

"What's wrong, Sister? You look mighty mournful this afternoon!"

"Bruce, what do you know about Ned Lytton?" she asked, cautiously, looking about to see that no one could overhear.

"Why? What do *you* know about him?"

"Well, his wife's here; you took him upstairs with you that night dead drunk, you went home and he was gone before any of us was up. She . . . she's worried to fits about him. Everybody's tryin' to put her off his track, 'cause they feel sorry for her; they think

he's probably gone back to his mine to sober up, but nobody wants to see her follow and find out what he is. Nobody thinks she knows how he's been actin'.

"You know, they think that she's his sister. I don't."

He scooped water from the shallow basin and buried his face in the cupped hands that held it, rubbing and blowing furiously.

"That's what I come to town for, Nora, because I suspected she'd be worryin'." To himself he thought, "Sister! That helps!"

"You mean, you know where he is?"

"Yeah,"—nodding his head as he wiped his hands—"I took him home. I got him there in bed an' I come to town th' first chance I got to tell her he's gettin' along fine."

"That was swell of you, Bruce," she said, with an admiring smile.

He shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly.

"Yes, it was!" she insisted. "To do it for her. She's th' sweetest thing ever come into this town, an' he's . . ."

She ended by making a wry face.

"You had a run-in with him, didn't you?" he asked, as if casually, and the girl looked at him sharply.

"How'd you know?"

"He's been kind of nutty an' said somethin' about it."

A pause.

"He come in here last week, Bruce, drunk. He made a grab for me an' said somethin' fresh an' he was so crazy, so awful lookin', that it scart me for a minute. I told him to keep away or you'd knock all th' poison out of him. He . . . You see,"—apologetically—"I was scart an' I knew that was th' easiest way out—to tell him you'd get after him. You . . . Th' worst of 'em back up when they think you're likely to land on 'em."

He reached out and pinched her cheek, smiled and shook his head with mock seriousness.

"Lordy, Sister, you'd make me out a hell-winder of a bad man, wouldn't you?"

"Not much! 'N awful good man, Bruce. That's what puts a crimp in 'em—your goodness!"

He flushed at that.

"Tryin' to josh me now, ain't you?" he laughed. "Well, josh away, but if any of 'em get fresh with you an' I'll . . . I'll have th' sheriff on 'em!"—with a twinkle in his gray eyes. Then he sobered.

"I s'pose I'd better go up to her room now," he said, an uneasy manner coming over him. "She'll be glad to know he's gettin' along so well . . .

"So everybody thinks she's his sister, do they?"—with an effort to make his question sound casual and as an afterthought.

"Yes, they do. I'm th' only one who's guessed she's his wife an' I kept my mouth shut. Rest of 'em all swear she couldn't be, that's she's his sister, 'cause she

. . . well, she ain't th' kind that would marry a thing like that. I didn't say nothin'. I let 'em think as they do; but I know! No sister would worry th' way she does! "

"You're a wise gal," he said, "an' when you said she was th' sweetest thing that ever come to this town you wasn't so awful wrong."

He opened the door and closed it behind him.

In the middle of the kitchen floor the girl stood alone, motionless, her eyes glowing, pulses quickened. Then, the keen light went from her face; its expression became doggedly patient, as if she were confronted by a long, almost hopeless undertaking, and with a sigh she turned to her tasks.

Patient Nora! As Bayard had closed the door behind him unthinkingly, so had he closed the door to his heart against the girl. All her crude, timid advances had failed to impress him, so detached from response to sex attraction was his interest in her. And for months she had waited . . . waited, finding solace in the fact that no other woman stood closer to him; but now . . . she feared an unnamed influence.

Ann Lytton, staring at the page of a book, heard his boots on the stair. He mounted slowly, spurs ringing lightly with each step, and, when he was halfway up, she rose to her feet, walked to the door of her room and stood watching him come down the narrow, dark hallway, filling it with his splendid height, his unusual breadth.

They spoke no greeting. She merely backed into the room and Bruce followed with a show of slight embarrassment. Yet his gaze was full on her, steady, searching, intent. Only when she stopped and held out her hand did his manner of looking at her change. Then, he smiled and met her firm grasp with a hand that was cold and which trembled ever so slightly.

"He . . . is he . . ." she began in an uncertain voice.

"He's doin' fine, ma'am," he said, and her fingers tightened on his, sending a thrill up his arm and making its muscles contract to draw her a bit closer to him. "He's doin' fine," he repeated, relinquishing his grasp. "He's feelin' better an' lookin' better an' he'll begin to gain strength right off."

An inarticulate exclamation of gladness broke from her.

"Oh, it's been an age!" she said, smiling wanly and shaking her head slowly as she looked up into his face. "Every hour has seemed a day, every day a week. I didn't dare, didn't dare think; and I've hoped so long, with so little result that I didn't dare hope!"

She bowed her head and held her folded hands against her mouth. For a moment they were so, the cowboy looking down at her with a restless, covetous light in his eyes and it was the impulsive lifting of one hand as though he would stroke the blue-black braids that roused her.

"Come, sit down," she said, indicating a chair op-

posite hers by the open window. "I want you to tell me everything and I want to ask you if it isn't best that I go to him now.

"Now, from the beginning, please!"

He looked into her eyes as though he did not hear her words. Her expression of eager anticipation changed; her look wavered, she left off meeting his gaze and Bayard, with a start, moved in his chair.

"There ain't much to tell," he mumbled. "I got him home easy enough an' sent th' team back that day by a friend of mine who happened along. . . ."

Her eyes returned to his face, riveting there with an impersonal earnestness that would not be challenged. Her red lips were parted as she sat with elbows on knees in the low rocker before him. It was his gaze, now, that wavered, but he hastened on with his recital of what he thought best to tell about what had occurred at his ranch in the last two days.

From time to time he glanced at her and on every occasion the mounting appreciation of her beauty, the unfaltering earnestness of her desire to learn every detail about her husband, the wonder that her sort could remain devoted to Ned Lytton's kind, combined to enrage him, to make him rebel hotly, even as he talked, at thought of such impossible human relations, and he was on the point of giving vent to his indignation when he remembered with a decided shock that on their first meeting she had told him that she loved her husband. Beyond that, he reasoned, nothing could be said.

"He's awful weak, of course, but he was quiet," he concluded. "I left him sleepin' an' I'll get back before he rouses up, it's likely."

"Well, don't you think I might go back with you?" she asked, eagerly. "Don't you think he's strong enough now, so I might be with him?"

He had expected this and was steeled against it.

"Why, you might, ma'am, if things was different," he said. "It's sort of rough out there; just a shack, understand, an' you've never lived that kind of life. There's only one room, an' I . . ."

"Oh, I hadn't thought of crowding you out! Please don't think I'd overlook your own comfort."

Her regret was so spontaneous, that he stirred uneasily, for he was not accustomed to lying.

"Not at all, ma'am. Why, I'd move out an' sleep in th' hills for you, if I knew it was best . . . for you!"

The heart that was in his voice startled her. She sat back in her chair.

"You've been very kind . . . so kind!" she said, after a pause.

He fidgetted in his chair and rose.

"Nobody could help bein' kind . . . to you, ma'am," he stammered. "If anybody was anything but kind to you they deserve . . ."

He realized of a sudden that the man for whose sake she was undergoing this ordeal had been cruel to her,

and checked himself. Because bitterness surged up within him and he felt that to follow his first impulses would place him between Ann Lytton and her husband, aligned against the man in the rôle of protector.

She divined the reason for his silence and said very gently,

“Remember the cripples!”

He turned toward her so fiercely that she started back, having risen.

“I’m tryin’ to!” he cried, with a surprising sharpness. “Tryin’ to, ma’am, every minute; tryin’ to remember th’ cripples.”

He looked about in flushed confusion. Ann stared at him.

His intensity frightened her. The men of her experience would not have presumed to show such direct interest in her affairs on brief acquaintance. A deal of conventional sparring and shamming would have been required for any of them to evince a degree of passion in the discussion of her predicament; but this man, on their second meeting, was obviously forced to hold himself firmly, restraining a natural prompting to step in and adjust matters to accord with his own sense of right. The girl felt instinctively that his motives were most high, but his manner was rough and new; she was accustomed to the usual, the familiar, and, while her confidence in Bayard had been profoundly aroused, her inherent distrust of strangeness caused

her to suspect, to be reluctant to accept his attitude without reserve. Looking up at her he read the conflict in her face.

"I'd better go now," he added in a voice from which the vigor had gone. "I . . ."

"But you'll let me know about Ned?" she asked, trying to rally her composure.

"I'll come to-morrow, ma'am," he promised.

"That'll be so kind of you!"

"You don't understand, maybe, that it's no kindness to you," he said. "It might be somethin' else. Have you thought of that? Have you thought, ma'am, that maybe I ain't th' kind of man I'm pretendin' to be?"

Then, he walked out before she could answer and she stood alone, his words augmenting the disquiet his manner had aroused. She moved to the window, anxiously waiting to see him ride past. He did, a few minutes later, his head down in thought, his fine, flat shoulders braced backward, body poised splendidly, light, masterly in the saddle, the wonderful creature under him moving with long, sure strides. The woman drew a deep breath and turned back into the room.

"I mustn't . . . I mustn't," she whispered.

Then wheeled quickly, snatched back the curtains and pressed her cheek against the upper panes to catch a last glimpse of him.

Next day Bayard was back and found that the hours

Ann had spent alone had taken their toll and she controlled herself only by continual repression. He urged her to talk, hoping to start her thinking fresh thoughts, but she could think, then, only of the present hour. Her loneliness had again broken down all barriers. Bayard was her confessor, her talk with him the only outlet for the emotional pressure that threatened her self-control; that relief was imperative, overriding her distrust of the day before. For an hour the man listened while she gave him the dreary details of her married life with that eagerness of the individual who, for too long a period, has hidden and nursed heart-breaking troubles. She was only twenty-four and had married at twenty. A year later Ned's father had died, the boy came into sudden command of considerable property, lost his head, frittered away the fortune, drank, could not face the condemnation of his family and fled West on the pretext of developing the Sunset mine, the last tangible asset that remained. She tried to cover the entire truth there, but Bayard knew that Lytton's move was only desertion, for she told of going to work to support herself, of standing between Ned and his relatives, of shielding him from the consequences of the misadministration of his father's estate, of waiting weeks and months for word of him, of denying herself actual necessities that she might come West on this mission.

At the end she cried and Bayard felt an unholy desire to ride to his Circle A ranch and do violence to the

man who had functioned in this woman's life as a maker of misery. But he merely sat there and put his hands under his thighs to keep them from reaching out for the woman, to comfort her, to claim a place as her protector. . . .

The talk and tears relieved Ann and she smiled bravely at him when he left; a tenderness was in her face that disturbed him.

Day after day the rancher appeared in Yavapai, each time going directly to the hotel and to Ann. Many times he talked to her in her room; often, they were seen together on the veranda; occasionally, they walked short distances. The eyes of the community were on Ann anyhow, because, being new, she was intrinsically interesting, but this regularity on the part of Bayard could not help but attract curious attention and cause gossip, for in the years people had watched him grow from a child to manhood one of the accepted facts about him had been his evident lack of interest in women. To Nora, the waitress, he had given frank, companionable attention and regarding them was a whispered tradition arising when the unknown girl arrived in Yavapai and Bruce appeared to be on intimate terms with her from the first.

But now Nora received little enough of his time. She watched his comings and goings with a growing concern which she kept in close secret and no one, unless they had watched ever so closely, would have seen the slow change that came over the brown haired girl.

Her amiable bearing toward the people she served became slightly forced, her laughter grew a trifle hard, and, when Bruce was in sight, she kept her eyes on him with steady inquiry, as one who reads eagerly and yet dreads to know what is written.

One day the cattleman came from the hotel and crossed the street to the Yavapai saloon where a dozen men were assembled. Tommy Clary was there among others and, when they lined up before the bar on Bruce's arrival, feet on the piece of railroad steel that did service as footrail, Tommy, with a wink to the man at his right said:

"Now, Bruce, you're just in time to settle 'n argument. All these here other *hombres* are sayin' you've lost your head an' are clean skirt crazy, an' I've been tellin' 'em that you're only tryin' to be a brother to her. Ain't that right, now? Just back me up, Bruce!"

He stood back and gestured in mock appeal, while the others leaned forward over the bar at varying degrees that they might see and grinned in silence. Bayard looked straight before him and the corners of his mouth twitched in a half smile.

"Who is this lady you're honorin' by hitchin' me' up with?" he asked.

"Ho, that's good! I s'pose you don't quite comprehend our meanin'! Well, I'll help you out. This Lytton girl, sister to our hydrophobia skunk! They think you're in love, Bruce, but I stick up for you like a friend ought to. I think you're only brotherly!"

"Why, Tommy, they ought to take your word on anythin' like that," Bayard countered, turning slowly to face the other. "Th' reason th' *Yavapai Argus* perished was 'cause Tom Clary beat th' editor to all th' news, wasn't it?"

The laugh was on the short cowboy and he joined it heartily.

"But if that's true — that brother stuff —," he said, when he could be heard, "seems to me you're throwin' in with a fine sample of stalwart manhood!"

Then they were off on a concerted damnation of Ned Lytton and under its cover Bayard thanked his stars that Nora had been right, that Yavapai had been satisfied with jumping at the conclusion that Ann could not be her husband's wife.

"But I'll tell you, Bruce," went on Tommy, as Bayard started to leave, "if I was as pretty a fellow as you are, I'd make a play for that gal myself! If she'd only get to know me an' know 'bout my brains, it'd all be downhill an' shady. But she won't. You got th' looks; I've got th' horse power in my head. Can't we form a combination?"

"I'm sort of again' combinations . . . where women are concerned," Bruce answered, and walked out before they could see the seriousness that possessed him.

On his way out of town Bayard passed two friends but did not look at them nor appear to hear their salutations. He was a mile up the road before his ab-

sorption gave way to a shake of the head and the following summing up, spoken to the jogging Abe:

"Gosh, Pardner, back there they've all got me in love with her. I had a hard time keepin' my head, when they tried to josh me about it. I ain't ever admitted it to myself, even, but has that—not admittin' it—got anything to do with it, I wonder? Does it keep it from bein' so? Why should I get hot, if it ain't true?"

When they were in sight of the ranch, he spoke again,

"How 'n th' name of God can a man help lovin' a woman like that?"

And in answer to the assertion that popped up in his mind, he cried aloud: "He ain't no man; *he* ain't . . . an' she loves him!"

He put the stallion into a high lope then, partly to relieve the stress of his thinking, partly because he suddenly realized that he had been away from the ranch many hours. This was the first time that Lytton had been up and about when he departed and he wondered if, in the interval, the man had left the ranch, had stolen a march on him, and escaped to Yavapai or elsewhere to find stimulant.

Lytton's improvement seemed to have been marked in the last two days. That forenoon, when Bayard told him he was to go to town, the man had insisted on helping with the work, though his body was still weak. He had been pleasant, almost jovial, and it was with

pride that the rancher had told Ann of the results he had obtained by his care and his patience; had spoken with satisfaction in spite of the knowledge that ultimate success meant a snuffing out of the fire that burned in his heart . . . the fire that he would not yet admit existed.

Arrived at the ranch, Bruce forced the sorrel against his gate, leaned low to release the fastening and went on through. He was grave of face and silent and he walked toward the house after dismounting, deep in thought, struggling with the problem of conduct which was evolving from the circumstance in which he found himself.

On the threshold, after looking into the kitchen, he stood poised a moment. Then, with a cry of anger he strode into the room, halted and looked about him.

"You damned liar!" he cried into the silence.

Ned Lytton lay across the bed, face downward, breathing muffled by the tumbled blankets, and on the floor beside him was an empty whiskey bottle.

"You liar!" Bayard said again. "You strung me this mornin', didn't you? This was why you was so crazy to help me get an early start! You coyote!"

He moved noisily across the room and halted again to survey the scene. A cupboard had been roughly emptied and the clock had been overturned when Lytton searched its shelf; in another room an old dresser stood gaping, the things it had contained in a pile on the floor, its drawers flung in a corner. Everywhere

was evidence of a hurried search for a hidden thing. And that sought object was the bottle, the contents of which had sent the prostrate figure into its present state.

"You're just . . . carrion!" he said, disgustedly, staring at Lytton.

Then, with set face, he undressed the man, laid him gently on the pillows and covered him well.

"God help me to remember that you're a cripple!" he muttered, and turned to straighten the disorder of his house.

An hour later Bayard drew a chair to the bedside, seated himself and frowned steadily at the sleeping man.

"I've got to remember you're a cripple . . . got to," he said, over and over. "For her sake, I must. An' I can't . . . trust myself near her . . . I can't!"

The drunken man roused himself with a start and stared blearily, unintelligently into the other's face.

"Tha's righ', Ole Man," he mumbled. "Tha's ri'. . . ."

CHAPTER VIII

A HEART SPEAKS

With forebodings Bruce Bayard went to Ann Lytton the next day. She saw trouble on his face as he entered her room.

"What is it?" she asked, quietly, steadying herself, for she was ever ready for the worst.

He only continued to look gravely at her.

"Don't be afraid to tell me, Mr. Bayard. I can stand it; you can't hide it."

He looked at her, until he made sure that she was not speculating, that she was certain that he brought her bad news.

"Yesterday, while I was here, your husband ransacked my house an' found a quart of whiskey I had. . . ."

"Oh! After he sent you away, making you feel . . ."

"You know him right well, ma'am," he interrupted. "Yes, I guess all his show of bein' himself in th' mornin' was to get me to move out so he could look for th' booze. He knew it was there; he'd been waitin' this chance, I expect."

"How awful! What a way to treat you."

He smiled. "Don't mind me, ma'am; I'm thinkin' about you."

She looked back at him bravely.

"And the other day . . . when you left, you tried to make me stop thinking these kind things about you," she challenged. "You suggested that your interest in Ned and in me might not be fine."

It did not occur to either of them that at such a moment, under those conditions which they told themselves prevailed, talk and thought of their own special relations was out of place.

"I'm only doin' what I can . . . for you," he assured her. "An' I guess it ain't much I can do. I'm kind of a failure at reformin' men, I guess. I want to keep on tryin', though. I,"—he moistened his lips—"I don't like to think of givin' up an' I don't like to think of turnin' him over to you like he is."

She smiled appreciatively, downing her misery for the moment, and hastened to say:

"Don't you think it would be better, if I were there now? You see, I could be with him all the time, watch him, help him over the worst days. It surely wouldn't set him back to see me now."

"And might it not be that living alone with you, away from the things he needs: good care, the comforts he's been brought up to know, the right food . . ."

So confused was Bayard before the conviction that he must meet this argument, that he proceeded without caution, without thought of the foundation of lies on

which his separation of husband and wife rested, he burst out:

"But he has them there! Here, ma'am, he'd been seein' an' hearin' folks, he'd be tempted continually. Out there . . . why, ma'am, he don't see nobody, hear nothin'. He couldn't be more comfortable. There ain't a house in Yavapai, not one this side o' Prescott, that's better fixed up. I brought out a bed for him into th' kitchen so 't would be lighter, easier for him to be watched. He . . . I have sheets for him an' good beddin'. I got eggs an' fruit an' . . ."

The perplexity on her face stopped him.

"But you said, you said it was too rough for a woman, that it wasn't much of a house, that it only had one room, that it . . ."

One hand extended, leaning toward him, brows raised, accusing, she sought for explanation and she saw his face flood with flush, saw his chest fill.

"Well, I lied to you," he said, the lines of his body going suddenly lax as he half turned from her. "It ain't rough. It's a pretty fair outfit."

She dropped her hands until they met before her and a look of offended trust, came into her face, settling the lines about her mouth into an expression of determination.

"But why?" she asked him. "Why should you lie to me and keep me from Ned, my husband? I trusted you; I believed what you said. Why was it, Mr. Bayard?"

He turned on her, eyes burning, color running from his face.

"I'll tell you why, ma'am," he said, chokingly, as though his lungs were too full of air. "I'll tell you: It's because I didn't dare trust myself under th' same roof with you, that's why; it's because I know that if you're around me you'll be . . . you'll be in danger.

"No man should tempt himself too far an' 't would be temptin', if I was to let you come there. You don't know this country. You don't know us men . . . men like I am. I don't know your kind of men myself; but we're rough, we're not nice when we want a thing. We haven't got nice manners. I tell you, ma'am, I want to help you all I can, but I've got to look out for myself, you see! Do you see that, ma'am? I thought I could see you now an' then safe enough, but I can't I guess. . . . This had to come out; it had to!"

A forearm half raised she stepped back from him, settling her weight to one foot. He breathed heavily twice to relieve the congestion that strained his voice.

"When I stood down there th' other night,"—gesturing toward the entrance of the hotel—"an' looked into the darkness an' saw your face there, it was like an angel . . . or somethin'. It caught me in th' throat, it made my knees shake—an' they've never shook from fear or anythin' else in my life. When we set in that next room washin' out that wound, bindin' it up, I didn't give a damn if that man lived or died —"

"Oh!" she cried, and drew away another step, but

he followed close, bound that she should hear, should understand.

"— If he lived or died," he repeated. "I wanted to be near you, to watch your fingers, to see th' move of your shoulders, to look at th'— th' pink of your neck through your waist, to see your lips an' your eyes an' your hair . . . ma'am. I didn't give a damn about that man. It was you; your strangeness, your nerve, your sand, I wanted to see, to know about . . . an' your looks. Then you said, you said he was your husband an' for a minute I wanted him to die, I did! That was a black minute, ma'am; things went round, I didn't know what was happenin'. Then, I come out of it and I realized; realized what kind of a woman you are, if you'd come clear from th' East on th' trail of a . . . a . . . your husband, an' speak of him as a cripple an' be as . . . as wrought up over him as you was —

"I thought then, like a fool I was, that I'd be doin' somethin' fine if I took that . . . that . . . your husband an' made a man of him an' sent him back to you, a man!"

He gulped and breathed and his hands fell to his sides. He moved back an awkward pace.

"Well, it would,"—averting his face. The resonance had gone from his voice. "It would have been fine. It . . . it *will* be fine,"—in a whisper.

"But I can't stand you around," he muttered, the tone rallying some of its strength. "I can't; I can't!

I couldn't have you in th' same room in my sight. I'd keep thinkin' what he is an' what you are; comparin' you. It'd tear my heart out!

"Ma'am don't think I ain't tried to fight against this!" extending his palms pleadingly. "I've thought about you every minute since I first saw you down there 'n th' hallway. I've lied to myself, I've tried to make myself think different but I can't! I can't help it, ma'am . . . an' I don't know as I would if I could, 'cause it's somethin' I never knew could be before!"

He was talking through clenched teeth now, swiftly, words running together, and the woman, a hand on her lips, gave evidence of a queer, fascinating fright.

He had said that she did not know his sort of man. He had spoken truth there. And because she did not know his breed, she did not know how to judge him now. Would he really harm her? Was he possessed of desires and urgings of which he had no control? She put those questions to herself and yet she could not make her own heart believe the very things he had told her about himself. She feared, yes; but about the quality she feared was a strong fascination. He caused her to sense his own uncurbed vitality, yet about the danger of which he talked was a compelling quality that urged her on, that made her want to know that danger intimately . . . to suffer, perhaps, but to know!

"You'll let me alone, won't you, ma'am?" he continued. "You'll stay away? You'll stay right here

an' give me a chance to play my hand? I'll make him or break him, ma'am! I'll send him back to you, if there's a spark of man left in him, I will; I promise you that! I will because you're th' only woman —"

"Don't!" She threw up a hand as she cried sharply, "Don't say it!"

"I will say it!" he declared, moving to her again. "I will!"

"I love you, I love you! I love that lock of hair blowin' across your cheek; I love that scared look in your eyes now; I love th' way th' blood's pumpin' in your veins; I love you . . . all of you. But you told me th' other night, you loved your husband. I asked you. You said you did. 'I do,' that's what you said. I know how you looked, how it sounded, when you said it, 'I do.' That's why I'm workin' with him; that's why I want to make him a man. You can't waste your lovin', ma'am; you can't!"

He stepped even closer.

"That's why you've got to keep away from me! You can't handle him alone. You can't come to my ranch to handle him because of *me*. Nobody else will take him in around here. It's me or nobody. It's my way or th' old way he's been goin' until he comes to th' end.

"I promise you this. I'll watch over him an' care for him an' guard him in every way. I'll put the best I've got into bringin' him back. . . . An' all th' time I'll be wishin'—prayin', if I could—that a thunder-

bolt 'uld strike him dead! He ain't fit for you, ma'am! He's no more fit for you than . . . than . . .

"Hell, ma'am, there's no use talkin'! He's your husband, you've said you loved him, that's enough. But if he, if he wasn't your husband, if he . . ."

He jerked open the front of his shirt, reached in and drew out his flat, blue automatic pistol.

She started back with a cry.

"Don't you be afraid of me," he cried fiercely, grasping her wrist. "Don't you ever!

"You take this gun; you keep it. It's mine. I don't want to be able to hurt him, if I should ever lose my head. Sometimes when I set there an' look at him an' hear him cussin' me, I get hot in th' head; hot an' heavy an' it buzzes. I . . . I thought maybe sometime I might go crazy an' shoot him,"—with deadly seriousness. "An' I wouldn't do that, ma'am, not to yours, no matter what he might do or say to me. I brought my rifle in to-day to have th' sights fixed; they needed it an' 't would get it out of th' house. You'll keep this gun, won't you, please, ma'am?"

His pleading was as direct as that of a child and, eyes on his with a mingling of emotions, Ann Lytton reached a groping hand for the weapon. She was stunned. Her nervous weakness, his strength, the putting into words of that great love he bore for her, the suggested picture of contrast with the man between them, the conflict it all aroused in her conscience, the reasonless surging of her deepest emotions, combined

to bewilder the woman. She reached out slowly to take his weapon and do his bidding, moved by a subconscious desire to obey, and all the while her eyes grew wider, her breath faster in its slipping between her parted lips.

Her fingers touched the metal, warmed by his body heat, closed on it and her hand, holding the pistol, fell back to her side. She turned her face from him and, with a palm hard against one cheek, whispered,

“ Oh, this is horrible! ”

The man made a wry smile.

“ I presume it is, ma'am,”— drearily, “ but I can't help it, lovin' you.”

“ No, no, not that! ” she cried. “ I didn't mean *that* was horrible. It . . . it isn't. The horrible thing is the rest, the whole situation.”

“ I know it is,” he went on, heedless of her explanation, moving toward the window and looking into the street as he talked, his back to her. “ I know it is, but it had to be. If I had kept from talkin' it would sort of festered in me. When a horse runs somethin' in his foot, you've got to cut th' hoof away, got to hurt him for a while, or it'll go bad with him. Let what's in there out an' gettin' along will be simple.

“ That's how it was with me, you see. If I'd kept still, I'd 'a' gone sort of *loco*, I might have hurt him. But now . . .

“ Why, now, I can just remember that you know how I feel, that you wouldn't want a man who's said he loves

you to be anythin' but kind to your . . . to Ned Lytton."

When he finished, the woman took just one step forward. It was an impulsive movement, as if she would run to him, throw herself on him; and her lips were parted, her throat ready to cry out and ask him to take her and forget all else but that love he had declared for her. In a flash the madness was past; she remembered that she must not forget anything because of his confession of love, rather that she must keep more firmly than ever in mind those other factors of her life, that she must stifle and throttle this yearning for the man before her which had been latent, the existence of which she had denied to herself until this hour, and which was consuming her strength now with its desire for expression.

She walked slowly to the dresser and laid his gun there, as though even its slight weight were a burden.

"I'm so sorry," she said, as though physically weak, "I'm so sorry." He turned away from the window with a helpless smile. "I don't feel right, now, in letting you do this for me. I feel . . ."

"Why don't you feel right?"

"Because . . . because it means that you are giving me everything and I'm giving nothing in return."

"Don't think that, ma'am," with a slow, convinced shaking of his head, "I'm doin' little enough for what I get."

"For what *you* get!"

"What I get, ma'am, is this. I can come to see you. I can look at your face, I can see your hair, I can watch you move an' hear you talk an' be near you now an' then, even if I ain't any right, even if . . ."

He threw out his arms and let them fall back to his thighs as he turned from her again.

"That's what I get in exchange," he continued a moment later. "That's my pay, an' for it, I'd go through anything, thirst or hunger or cold . . . anythin', ma'am. That's how much I think of you: that's why carin' for . . . for that man out home ain't any job even if he is . . . if you are his!"

On that, doubt, desire, again overrode her training, her traditional manner of thought. She struggled to find words, but she could not even clarify her ideas. Impressions came to her in hot, passing flashes. A dozen times she was on the point of crying out, of telling him one thing or another, but each time the thought was gone before she could seize upon and crystallize it. All she fully realized was that this thing was love, big, clean, sanctified; that this man was a natural lover of women, with a body as great, as fine as the heart which could so reveal itself to her; and that in spite of that love's quality she was helpless, bound, gagged even, by the circumstances that life had thrown about her. She would have cried out against them, denouncing it all . . .

Only for the fact that that thing, conscience, handed

down to her through strict-living generations, kept her still, binding her to silence, to passivity.

"I won't bother you again this way," she heard him saying, his voice sounding unreal as it forced its way through the roaring in her head. "I had to get it out of my system, or it'd have gone in some other direction; reaction, they call it, I guess. Then, somebody'd have been hurt or somethin' broken, maybe your heart,"—looking at her with his patient smile.

"I'll go back home; I'll work with him. Sometimes, I'll come to see you, if you don't mind, to tell you about . . . him. You don't mind, do you?"

With an obvious effort, she shook her head. "No, I don't mind. I'll be glad to see you," she muttered, holding her self-possession doggedly.

An awkward pause followed in which Bayard fussed with the ends of the gay silk scarf that hung about his neck and shoulders.

"I guess I'd better go now," he mumbled, and picked up his hat.

"You see, I don't know what to say to you," Ann confessed, drawing a hand across her eyes. "It has all overwhelmed me so. I . . . perhaps another time I can talk it over with you."

"If you think it's best to mention it again, ma'am," he said.

She extended her hand to him and he clasped it. On the contact, his arm trembled as though he would crush

the small fingers in his, but the grasp went no further than a formal shake.

"In a day or two . . . Ann," he said, using her given name for the first time.

He bowed low, turned quickly and half stumbled into the hall, closing the door behind him as he went.

The woman sat down on the edge of the bed weakly.

In the dining room Nora Brewster was dusting and she looked up quickly at Bayard's entrance.

"Hello, Bruce," she said, eyes fastening on him eagerly. "You're gettin' to be a frequent caller, ain't you?"

He tried to smile when he answered,

"Hardly a caller; kind of an errand boy, between bein' a nurse an' jailer."

He could not deceive the girl. She dropped her dustcloth to a chair, scanning his face intently.

"What's wrong, Bruce? You look all frazzled out."

He could not know how she feared his answer.

"Nothin'," he evaded. "He's been pretty bad an' I've missed sleep lately; that's all."

But that explanation did not satisfy Nora. She knew it was not the whole truth. She searched his face suspiciously.

"She . . . his wife," he went on, steadyng his voice. "It's hard on her, Nora."

"I know it is, poor thing," she replied, almost

mechanically. "I talk to her every time I can, but she, she ain't my kind, Bruce. You know that. The' ain't much I can say to her. Besides, I dasn't let on that I know who she is or that you've got her husband."

Her eyes still held on his inquiringly.

"You might get her outdoors," he ventured. "Keepin' in that room day an' night, worryin' as she does, is worse 'n jail. You . . . You ride a lot. Why don't you get her some ridin' clothes an' take her along? I'll tell Nate to give you an extra horse. You see . . ."

The girl did see. She saw his anxiety for the woman upstairs. She knew the truth then, and the thing which she had feared through those days rang in her head like a sullen tocsin. She had felt an uneasiness come into her heart with the arrival of this eastern woman, this product of another civilization with her sweetness, her charm for both her own sex and for men. And that uneasiness had grown to apprehension, had mounted as she watched the change in Bayard under Ann's influence until now, when she realized that the thing which she had hoped against for months, which she had felt impending for days, had become reality; and that she, Bayard, Ned Lytton, Ann, were fast in the meshes of circumstances that bound and shut down upon them like a net, forecasting tragedy and the destruction of hopes. Nora feared, she feared with that groundless, intuitive fear peculiar to her kind; almost an animal instinct, and she felt her heart

leaping, her head becoming giddy as that warning note struck and reverberated through her consciousness. Her gaze left the man's face slowly, her shoulders slackened and almost impatiently she turned back to her work that he might not see the foreboding about her.

"You see, th' open air would help her, an' bein' with you, another woman, even if you an' she don't talk th' same language, would help too," he ended.

"I see," Nora answered after a moment, as she tilted a chair to one leg and stooped low to rub the dust from its spindles. "I understand, Bruce. I'll take her to ride . . . every day, if you think it's best."

Something about her made Bayard pause, and the moment of silence which followed was an uneasy one for him. The girl kept on with her task, eyes averted, and he did not notice that she next commenced working on a chair that she had already dusted.

"That's a good girl, Nora," he said. "That'll help her."

He left then and, when the ring of his spurs had been lost in the lazy afternoon, the girl sat suddenly in the chair on which she had busied herself and pressed the dustcloth hard against her eyes. She drew a long, sharp breath. Then, she stood erect and muttered,

"Oh, God, has it come?"

Then, stolidly, with set mouth, she went on with her work, movements a little slower, perhaps, a bit lethargic, surely, bungling now and then. Something

had gone from her . . . a hope, a sustaining spark, a leaven that had lightened the drudgery.

Upstairs in her room Ann Lytton lay face down on her bed, hands gripping the coarse coverlet, eyes pressed shut, breath swift and irregular, heart racing. What had gone from the girl below — the hope, the spark, the leaven which makes life itself palatable — had come to her after those years of nightmare, and Ann was resisting, driving it back, telling herself that it must not be, that it could not be, not in the face of all that had happened; not now, when ethical, moral, legal ties bound her to another! Oh, she was bound, no mistaking that; but it was not Ann's heart that wrenched at the bonds. It was her conscience, her trained sense of right and wrong, the traditions that had moulded her. No, her heart was gone, utterly, to the man who crossed the hard, beaten street of Yavapai, head down, dejection in the swing of his shoulders, for her heart knew no right, no wrong . . . only beauty and ugliness.

Bayard, too, fought his bitter fight. The urge in him was to take her, to bear her away, to defy the laws that men had made to hurt her and to devil him; but something behind, something deep in him, forbade. He must go on, nursing back to strength that mockery of manhood who could lift his fuddled, obscene head and, with the blessing of society, claim Ann Lytton as his — her body, her soul! He must go on,

though he wanted to strangle all life from the drunken ruin, because in him was the same rigid adherence to things that have been which held the woman there on her bed, face down, even though her limbs twitched to race after him and her arms yearned to twine about his neck, to pull herself close to his good chest, within which the great heart pumped.

And Nora? Was she conscienceless? Indeed, not. She had promised to befriend this strange woman because Bruce Bayard had asked it. It was not for Ann's sake she dully planned diversion; it was because of her love for the owner of the Circle A that she stifled her sorrow, her natural jealousy. She knew that to refuse him, to follow her first impulses, would hurt him; and that would react, would hurt her, for her devotion was that sort which would go to any length to make the man of her heart happier.

To Ann's ears came Bruce's sharp little whistle, and she could no longer lie still. She rose, half staggered to the window and stood holding the curtains the least bit apart, watching him stand motionless in the middle of the thoroughfare. Again, his whistle sounded and from a distance she heard the high call of the sorrel horse who had moved along the strip of grass that grew close beside the buildings, nibbling here and there. The animal approached his master at a swinging trot, holding his head far to the right, nose high in the air, that the trailing reins might not dangle under his feet. All the time he nickered his reassur-

ance and, when he drew to a halt beside his master, Abe's voice retreated down into his long throat until it was only a guttural murmur of affection.

"Old Timer, if I was as good a man as you are horse, I'd find a way," Bruce said half aloud as he gathered the reins.

He mounted with a rhythmical swing of shoulder and limb, and gave the stallion his head, trotting out of town with never a look about.

CHAPTER IX

LYTTON'S NEMESIS

That which followed was a hard night for both Bayard and Lytton. The wounded arm was doing nicely, but the shattered nervous system could not be repaired so simply. Since the incident of the ransacked house and the pilfered whiskey, Lytton had not had so much as one drink of stimulant and, because of that indulgence of his appetite, his suffering was made manifold. Denial of further liquor was the penalty Ned was forced to pay for the abuse of Bayard's trust. Much of the time the sick man kept himself well in hand, was able to cover up outward evidence of the torture which he underwent, and in that fact rested some indication of the determination that had once been in him. But this night the effects of his excesses were tearing at his will persistently and sleep would not come.

He walked the floor of the room into which his bed had been moved from the kitchen after the first few days at the ranch; his strength gave out and for a time he lay on the bed, muttering wildly,— then walked again with trembling stride.

Bayard heard. He, too, was suffering; sleep would not come to ease him. He did not talk, did not yearn for action; just lay very quiet and thought and thought

until his mind refused to function further with coherence. After that, he forced himself to give heed to other matters for the sake of distraction and became conscious of the sounds from the next room. When they increased with the hours rather than subsiding, he got up, partly dressed, made a light and went to Lytton.

Quarrelling followed. The sick man raved and cursed. He blamed Bayard for all his suffering, denounced him as a meddler, whining and storming in turn. He declared that to fight against his weakness was futile; the next moment vowed that he would return to town, and face temptation there and beat it; and within a breath was explaining that he could easily cure himself, if he could only be allowed to taper off, to take one less drink each day. Before it all, Bayard remained quietly firm and the incident ended by Lytton screaming that at daylight he would leave the ranch and die on the Yavapai road before he would submit to another day of life there.

But when dawn came he was sleeping and the rancher, after covering him carefully, retired to his room for two hours' rest before rousing for a morning's ride through the hills.

He was back at noon and found Lytton white faced, contrite. Together they prepared a meal.

"I was pretty much of an ass last night," Lytton said after they had eaten a few moments in silence. It was one of those rare intervals in which a bearing of normal civility struggled through his despicability and Bayard

looked up quickly to meet his indecisive gaze, feeling somehow that with every flash of this strength he was rewarded for all the work he had done, the unpleasantness he had undergone. Rewarded, though it only made Lytton a stronger, more enduring obstacle between him and a consummation of his love.

"I'm sorry," the man confessed. "It wasn't I. It was the booze that's still in me."

"I understand," the cowman said, with a nod.

A moment of silence followed.

"There's something else, I'm sorry about," Lytton continued. "The other day I tried to get nasty about a girl, the girl Nora at the Manzanita House, didn't I?"

"Oh, you didn't know what you said."

"Well, if I didn't, that's no excuse." He was growing clearer, obtaining a better poise, assuming a more decided personality. "I apologize to you for what I said, and, if you think best, I'll go see her and apologize for the advances I made to her."

"No, no,"—with a quick gesture. "That wouldn't do any good; she'll never know."

"As you say, then. I wanted to tell you that I'm sorry; that's all. I know how a fellow feels when his girl's name is dragged into a brawl that way. I've noticed you sort of dolling up lately when you've started for town,"—with a faint twinkle in his eyes and a smile that approximated good nature. "I know how it is with you fellows who still have the

woman bug,"—a hint of bitterness. "I know how touchy you'll all get. You . . . you seem to be rather interested in that Nora girl."

Bayard made no answer. He was uneasy, apprehensive.

"I've heard 'em talk about it in town. Funny that she's the only woman you've fallen for, Bayard. They tell me you won't look at another, that you brought her to Yavapai yourself several years ago. You're so particular that you have to import one; is that it?"

He laughed aloud and a hint of nastiness was again in the tone. The other man did not answer with more than a quickly passing smile.

"Well, you fellows have all got to have your whirl at it, I suppose," Lytton went on, the good nature entirely gone. "You'll never learn except from your own experience. Rush around with the girls, have a gay time; then, it's some one girl, next, it's marriage and she's got you,"—holding up his gripped fist for emphasis. "She's got you hard and fast!"

He stirred in his chair and broke another biscuit in half.

"Believe me, I know, Bayard! I've been there. I . . . Hell, I married a girl with a conscience,"—drawling the words, "That's the kind that hangs on when they get you . . . that *good* kind! She's too damn fine for human use, she and her kind. You know," . . . laughing bitterly—"she started out to reform me. One of that kind; get me? A damned

straight-laced Puritan! She snivelled and prayed and, instead of helping me, she just drove me on and on. She's got me. See? I can't get away from her and the only good thing about being here is that there are miles between us and I don't hear her cant and prating!"

"Seems to me that a woman who sticks by a man when he goes clean to hell must amount to something," observed Bayard, gazing at him pointedly.

Lytton shrugged his shoulders.

"Maybe . . . in some ways, but who the devil wants that kind hanging around his neck?" He pushed his plate away and stared surlily out through the door. Bayard tilted back in his chair and looked the Easterner in the face critically.

"Suppose somebody was to come along an' tell you they was goin' to take her off your hands. What'd you say then?"

"What do you mean?" disgruntled at the challenge in Bayard's query.

"Just what I say. You've been tellin' me what a bad mess mixin' with women is. I'm askin' you what you'd do if somebody tried to take your woman. You say it's bad, bein' tied up. How about it, if somebody was to step in an' relieve you?"

The other moved in his chair.

"That's different," he said. "To want to be away from a woman until she got some common sense, and to have another man *take* your wife are two different

things. To have a man take your wife would make anybody want to kill, no matter what trouble you might have had with her. Breaking up marriages, taking something that belongs to another man, has nothing to do with what I was talking about."

"You don't want her yourself. You don't want anybody else to have her. Is that it?"

"Didn't I say that those were two different —"

"You want to look out, Neighbor!" Bayard said, with a smile, dropping the forelegs of his chair to the floor and leaning his elbows on the table. "You're talking one thing and meaning another. You want to keep your head, if you want to keep your wife. Don't make out you want to let go when you really want to hang on. Women are funny things. They'll stick to men like a burr, they'll take abuse an' suffer and give no sign of quittin', because they want love, gentleness, and they hate to give up thinkin' they'll get it from the man they'd planned would give it to 'em."

"But some day, while they're stickin' to a man who don't appreciate 'em, they'll see happiness goin' by . . . then, they're likely to get it. And sometime that's goin' to happen to your wife; she'll see happiness somewhere else an' she'll go after it; then, she won't be around your neck, but somebody else'll have her!"

"Oh, they're queer things . . . funny things! You can't tell where th' man's comin' from that'll meet 'em an' take their heart an' their head. He may be right near 'em all th' time an' they never wake up to it for

years; he may come along casual-like, not lookin' for anything, an' see 'em just by chance an' open his heart an' take 'em. . . .

"Once I was in th' Club in Prescott an' I heard a mining engineer from th' East sing a song about some man who lived on th' desert.

"From th' desert I come to thee,"
"it went,

"On a stallion shod with fire. . . ."

"An' then he goes on with th' finest love song you ever heard, endin' up:

"... 'a love that shall not die
Till th' sun grows cold,
An' th' stars are old,
An' th' leaves of th' Judgment Book unfold!"

"... That's the sort of guy that upsets a woman who's hungry for happiness. It's that kind of love they want. They'll stand most anything a long, long time; seems like some of 'em loved abuse. But if a real *hombre* ever comes along . . . Look out!

"You can't tell, Lytton. This thing love comes like a storm sometimes. A man's interest in a woman may be easy an' not amount to much at first. It's like this breeze comin' in here now; warm an' soft an' gentle, th' mildest, meekest little breeze you've ever felt, ain't it? Well, you can't tell what it'll be by night!

"I've seen it just like this, without a dust devil on th' valley or a cloud in th' sky. Then she'd get puffy an'

dust would commence to rise up, an' th' sky off there south an' west would begin to look dirty, rusty. Then, away off, you'd hear a whisper, a kind of mutter, growin' louder every minute, an' you'd see trees bend down to one another like they was hidin' their faces from somethin' that scared 'em. Dust would come before it like a wall an' then th' grass would flatten out an' look a funny white under that black and then . . . Zwoop! She'd be on you, blowin' an' howlin' an' thunderin' and lightnin' like hell itself. . . . When an hour before it'd been a breeze just like this."

He paused an instant.

"So you want to look out . . . if you want to keep her. Some man on a 'stallion shod with fire' may ride past an' look into your house an' see her an' crawl down an' commence to sing a love song that'll make her forget all about tryin' to straighten you up. . . . Some feller who's never counted with her may wake up and go after her as strong as a summer storm.

"She's young; she's sweet; she's beau . . ."

"Say, who told you about my wife?" Lytton demanded, drawing himself up.

Bayard stopped with a show of surprise. His earnestness had swept his caution, his sense of the necessity for deception, quite away, but he rallied himself as he answered:

"Why, I judge she is. She's stickin' by you like a sweet woman would."

"Well, what if she is?" Lytton countered, the sur-

prise in his face giving way to sullenness. "We've discussed me and my wife enough for one day. You're inexperienced. You don't know her kind. You don't know women, Bayard. Why, damn their dirty skins, they —"

"You drop that!" Bruce cried, rising and leaning across the table. "You keep your lying, dirty mouth shut or I'll . . ."

He drew his great fists upward slowly as though they lifted their limit in weight. Then suddenly went limp and smiled down at the face of the other man. He turned away slowly and Lytton drawled,

"Well, what's got into you?"

"Excuse me," said the rancher, with a short laugh. "I'm . . . I'm only worked up about a woman myself," reaching out a hand for the casing of the doorway to steady himself. "I'm only wondering what th' best thing to do is. . . . You said yourself that . . . experience was th' only way to learn. . . ."

That afternoon Lytton slept deeply. Of this fact Bayard made sure when, from his work in the little blacksmith shop, he saw a horesman riding toward the ranch from a wash that gouged down into Manzanita Valley. When he saw the man slumbering heavily on his bed, worn from the struggle and the sleeplessness of last night, he closed the door softly and returned to resume the shoeing of the pinto horse that stood dozing in the sunlight.

"Oh, you is it, Benny Lynch?" Bayard called, as the horseman leaned low to open the gate and rode in.

"Right again, Bruce. How's things?"

"Fine, Benny. Ain't saw you in a long time. Get down. Feed your horse?"

"No, thanks, we've both et."

The newcomer dismounted and, undoing his tie rope, made his pony fast to a post. He was a short, thick set young chap, dressed in rough clothing, wearing hob-nailed shoes. His clothes, his saddle, the horse itself belied the impression of a stock man and his shoes gave conclusive evidence that he was a miner. He turned to face Bayard and pushed his hat far back on his head, letting the sun beat down on his honest, bronzed face, peculiarly boyish, yet lined as that of a man who has known the rough edges of life.

"Mind if I talk to you a while, Bruce?" he asked, serious, preoccupied in his manner.

"Tickled to death, Benny; your conversation generally is enlightenin' an' interestin'."

This provoked only a faint flash of a smile from the other. Bayard kicked a wooden box along beside the building and both seated themselves on it. An interval of silence, which the miner broke by saying abruptly:

"I've done somethin', Bruce, that I don't like to keep to myself. I'm planning on doin' somethin' more that I want somebody to know so that if anything happens, folks 'll understand.

"I come to you,"—marking the ground with the

edge of his shoe sole, "because you're th' only man I know in this country — an' I know most of 'em — I'd trust."

"Them bouquets are elegant, Benny." Bayard laughed, trying to relieve the tension of the other. "Go ahead, I love 'em!"

"You know what I mean, Bruce. You've always played square with everybody 'round here, not mindin' a great deal about what other folks done so long as they was open an' honest about it. You've never stole calves, you've never been in trouble with your neighbors —"

"Hold on, Benny! You don't know how many calves I've stole."

The other smiled and put aside Bayard's attempt at levity with a gesture of one hand.

"You understand how it is, when a fellar's just got to talk?"

"I understand," said Bayard. "I've been in that fix myself, recent."

"I knew you would; that's why I come."

He shifted on the box and pulled his hat down over his eyes and said:

"I tried to kill a feller th' other night. I didn't make good. I'm likely to make another try some time, an' go through with it."

Bayard waited for more, with a queer thrill of realization.

"You know this pup Lytton, don't you, Bruce?"

Yes, everybody does, th' —————! I tried to get him th' other night in Yavapai. I thought I'd done it an' lit out, but I heard later I only nicked his arm. That means I've got to do it later."

"It's that necessary to kill him, is it, Benny?" Bayard asked. "I know he was hit. . . . Fact is, I found him an' took him into th' Hotel an' fixed him up."

Their gazes met. Benny Lynch's was peculiarly devoid of anger, steady and frank.

"That was like you, Bruce. You'd take care of a sick wolf, I guess. Next time, though, I'll give somebody a job as a gravedigger, 'stead of a good Samaritan. . . .

"But what I stopped in to-day for was to tell you th' whole story, so you'd know it all."

"Let her fly, Benny!"

"Prob'ly you know, Bruce, that I come out here from Tennessee, when I was only a spindly kid, with th' old man an' my mammy. We was th' last of our family. They'd feuded our folks down to 'n old man 'n old woman and a kid — me. We come 'cause th' old man got religion and moved west so he wouldn't have to kill nobody. I s'pose some back there claims to have druv him out, but they either didn't know him or they're lyin'. He'd never be druv out by fear, Bruce; he wasn't that kind.

"Well, we drifted through Colorado an' New Mex an' finally over here. We landed out yonder on th' Sunset group which th' old man located an' commenced

to work. I growed up there, Bruce. I helped my mammy an' my pap cut down trees an' pick up stone to make our house. I built my mammy's coffin myself when I was seventeen. Me an' pap buried her; me shovelin' in dirt an' rocks, him prayin' an' readin' out of th' Bible."

He paused to overcome the shaking of his voice.

"We hung on there an' was doin' right well with th' mine, workin' out a spell now an' then, goin' back an' developin' as long as our grub an' powder lasted. We got her right to where we thought she was ready to boom, when hard times come along, an' made us slow up. I started out, leavin' th' old man home, 'cause he was gettin' so old he wasn't much use anywhere an' it ain't right that old folks should work that way anyhow.

"I landed over in California and was in an' 'round th' Funeral Range for over two years, writin' to pap occasional an' hearin' from him every few months. I didn't make it very well an' our mine just had to wait on my luck, let alone th' hard times. We wouldn't sell out, then, 'cause we'd had to take little or nothin' for th' property. It worried me; my old man was gettin' old fast, he'd never had nothin' but hard knocks, if he was ever goin' to have any rest an' any fun it'd have to come out of that mine. . . .

"Well, while I was away along come this here Eastern outfit, promised to do all sorts of things, formed a corporation, roped th' old man in with their slick lies, an' give him 'bout a quarter value for

what we had. They beat him out of all he'd ever earnt, when he was past workin' for more! Now, Bruce, a gang of skunks that'd do that to as fine an old man as my dad was, ought to be burnt, hadn't they? "

"They had. Everybody sure loved your daddy, Ben."

"Well, the' was nothin' we could do. Them Eastern pups just set down an' waited for us to get tired an' let 'em have a clear field. So we moved out, left our house an' all, went to Prescott an' went to work, both of us, keepin' an eye on th' mine to see they didn't commence to operate on th' sly. After a while I got what looked like a good thing down on th' desert in a new town an' I went there.

"While I was gone, along comes this here Lytton an' finishes th' job. His dad had owned most of th' stock, an' he'd come here to start somethin'. He begun with my pappy. He lied to him, took advantage of an old man who was trustful an' an easy mark. He crooked it every way he could, he got everythin' we had; all th' work of my hands,"—holding their honest, calloused palms out—"all th' hopes of a good old man. It done him no good; he couldn't get enough backin' to do business. . . . But it killed my dad."

He stared vacantly ahead before saying:

"You know th' rest. Dad died. That killed him, Bruce, an' Lytton was to blame. Ain't that murder? Ain't it? "

"It's murder, Benny, but they won't call it that."

"No, but what they call it don't make no difference in th' right or th' wrong of it, does it? An' it don't matter to me. I've got a law all my own, Bruce, an' it's a damn sight more just 'n theirs!" He had become suddenly alert, intent. "Th' last thing that my old man said was that th' wickedest of th' world had killed him. He wouldn't blame no one man but I will . . . I do!"

He moved quickly on the box, bringing himself to face Bayard.

"I come back to this country an' waited. I've been thinkin' it over most two years, Bruce, an' I don't see no way out but to fix my old man's case myself. Maybe if things was different, I'd feel some other way about it, but this here Lytton is worse 'n scum, Bruce. You know an' everybody knows what he is. He's a drunken, lyin' ———! That's what he is!

"I've been watchin' him close for weeks, seein' him drink every cent of my dad's money, seein' him get to be less 'n less of a man.

"One day I was in town. I'd been drinkin' myself to keep from goin' crazy thinkin' 'bout this thing. Just at dusk, just when th' train come in an' everybody was down to th' station, I walked down th' street toward Nate's corral to get my horse. I seen him comin' towards me, Bruce. He was drunk, he could just about make it. He didn't know me, never has knowed who I was, but he looks up at me an' commences to cuss, an' I . . . Well, I draws an' fires."

He leaned back against the building.

"He dropped an' I thought things was squared, so I lit out. But I found out I shot too quick . . . or maybe I was drunker 'n I thought.

"Where was he hit, Bruce?"

"Left forearm, Benny . . . right there."

"Hum . . . I thought so. I had a notion that gun was shootin' to th' right."

They sat silent a moment, then he resumed:

"When I got to thinkin' it over I was glad I hadn't killed him. I made up my mind that wasn't the best way. That's a little too much like killin' just 'cause you're mad, so I made up my mind I'd go on about my business until I was meddled with.

"I'm livin' at my home, now, Bruce. I'm back at th' Sunset, livin' in th' cabin me an' my folks built with our hands, workin' alone in our mine, waitin' for good times to come again. I'm goin' to stay there . . . right along. It's goin' to be my mine 'cause it rightfully belongs to me, no matter what Lytton's damn corporation papers may say.

"Some day, when he sobers up, he'll start back there, Bruce. I'll be waitin' for him. I won't harm a hair, I won't say a word until he steps on to them claims. Then, by God, I'll shoot him down like he was a coyote tryin' to get my chickens!"

Bayard got up and thoughtfully stroked the hip of the pinto horse.

"I guess I understand, Benny," he said, after a moment. "I'm pretty sure I do."

"He's . . . He's as low as a snake's belly, ain't he, Bruce?"—as if for reassurance.

"Yes, an' he'd be lower, Benny, if there was anythin' lower," he remarked, grimly.

"He can shoot though; watch him, Benny! I've seen him beat th' best of us at a turkey shootin'."

"That's what makes me feel easy about it. I wouldn't want to kill a man that couldn't shoot as good as I can, anyhow."

Benny Lynch departed, still unsmiling, very serious, and, as Bayard watched him ride away, he shook his head in perplexity.

"I wish I was as free to act as you are," he thought. "But I ain't; an' your tellin' me has dug my hole just that much deeper!"

He looked out over the valley a long moment. It was bright under the afternoon sun but somehow it seemed, for him, to be queerly shadowed.

CHAPTER X

WHOM GOD HATH JOINED

The next day the puzzled cowman rode the trail to Yavapai to find that Ann was out. He was told that Nora had taken her riding, so he waited for their return, restless, finding no solace in the companionship that the saloon, the town's one gathering place for men, afforded.

He stood leaning against the front of the general store, deep in thought, when a distant rattle attracted his attention. He glanced down the street to his right and beyond the limits of the town saw a rapidly moving dust cloud approach. As it drew near, the rattling increased, became more distinct, gave evidence that it was a combination of many sounds, and Bayard smiled broadly, stirring himself in anticipation.

A moment more and the dust cloud dissolved itself into a speeding mantle for a team of ponies and a buckboard, on the seat of which sat the Rev. Judson A. Weyl. The horses came down the hard street, ears back, straining away from one another until they ran far outside the wheel tracks. The harnesses, too large for the beasts, dangled and flopped and jingled, the clatter and clank of the vehicle's progress became mani-

fold as every bolt, every brace, every bar and slat and spoke vibrated, seeming to shake in protest at that which held it to the rest, and, above it all, came the regular grating slap of the tire of a dished hindwheel, as in the course of its revolutions it met the metal brake shoe, as if to beat time for the ensemble.

The man on the seat sat very still, the reins lax in his hands. The spring under him sagged with his weight and his long legs were doubled oddly between the seat and broken dash. He appeared to give no heed to his team's progress; just sat and thought while they raced along, the off horse breaking into a gallop at intervals to keep pace with its long stepping mate.

Across from where Bayard stood, the team swung sharply to the right, shot under a pinyon tree, just grazing the trunk with both hubs of the wheels, and rounded the corner of a low little house, stopping abruptly when out of sight; and the rancher laughed aloud in the sudden silence that followed.

He went across the thoroughfare, followed the tracks of the buckboard and came upon the tall, thin, dust covered driver, who had descended, unfastened the tugs and was turning his wild-eyed, malevolent-nosed team of half broken horses into a corral which was shaded by a tall pine tree. He looked up as Bayard approached.

"Hel-lo, Bruce!" he cried, flinging the harness up on a post, and extending a hearty hand. "I haven't seen you in an age!"

"How are you, Parson?" the other responded, grip-

ping the offered hand and smiling good naturedly into the alert gaze from the black eyes. "I ain't saw you for a long time, either, but every now and then, when I'm ridin' along after my old cows, I hear a most awful noise comin' from miles away, an' I say to myself, 'There goes th' parson tryin' to beat th' devil to another soul!'"

The other laughed and cast a half shameful look at his buckboard, which Bayard was inspecting critically. It was held together with rope and wire; bolts hung loosely in their sockets; not a tight spoke remained in the wheels; the pole was warped and cracked and the hair stuffing of the seat cushion was held there only by its tendency to mat and become compact, for the cover was three-quarters gone.

"It's deplorable, ain't it," Bayard chuckled, "how th' Lord outfits his servants in this here country?"

The clergyman laughed.

"That's a chariot of fire, Bruce!" he cried. "Don't you understand?"

"It'd be on fire, if I had it, all right! It ain't fit for nothin' else. Why, Parson, I should think th' devil'd get you sure some of these nights when you're riskin' your neck in this here contraption an' trustin' to your Employer to restrainin' th' wickedness in that pair of unlovely males you call horses!"

"Well, maybe I should get a new rig," the other admitted, still laughing. "But somehow, I'm so busy looking after His strays in this country that I don't

get time to think about my own comfort. Maybe that's the best way. If I took time to worry about material discomforts, I suppose I'd feel dirty and worn and hot now, for I've had a long, long drive."

"A drink'd do you a lot of good, Parson," said Bruce, with a twinkle in his eye. "I don't mind drinkin' with you, even if you are a preacher."

"And *because* I'm a member of the clergy I have to drink with you whether I like it or not, Bruce!"—with a crack of his big hand on Bayard's shoulder. "A bottle of pop would taste fine about now, son!"

"Well, you wait here an' I'll get that brand of sham liquor," said Bruce, turning to start for the saloon.

"Hold on, Bruce. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I don't feel that I want to let you buy anything for me out of that place. Get me some at the drug store."

The younger man hesitated.

"Well, I got a few convictions myself, Parson. Maybe there ain't much to be said for s'loon men, but your friend who runs that pill foundry sells booze to Indians, I suspect, which ain't right an' which no self-respectin' s'loon man would do."

"Son, all life is a compromise," laughed Weyl. "You go buy what you like to drink; I'll buy mine. How's that?"

"That's about as fair as a proposition can be, I guess."

Ten minutes later they were seated in the shade of

the pine tree, backs against the corral where the sweat-crusted horses munched alfalfa. Bayard drank from a foaming bottle of beer, Weyl from a pop container. Both had removed their hats, and their physical comfort approached the absolute.

The cowman, though, was not wholly at ease. He listened attentively to the rector's discourse on the condition of his parish, but all the while he seemed to be bothered by some idea that lurked deep in his mind. During a pause, in which the brown pop gurgled its way through Weyl's thin lips, Bruce squinted through the beer that remained in his bottle and said,

"Somethin's been botherin' me th' last day or so, Parson, an' I sure was glad when I seen you comin' up in this here . . . chariot of fire."

"What is it, Bruce?"

"Well, here's th' case. If a jasper comes to you an' tells you somethin' in confidence, are you bound to keep your mouth shut even if somebody's likely to get hurt by this here first party's plan? I know your outfit don't have no confession — 'tain't confession I want. . . . It's advice . . . what'd you do if you was in that fix?"

The other straightened his long limbs and smiled gravely.

"I can tell you what I would do, Bruce; but, if it's a matter of consequence, I can't advise you what to do.

"That's one of the hardest things I have to meet —

honest men, such as you, coming to me with honest questions. I'm only a man like you are; I have the same problems, the same perplexities; it's necessary for me to meet them in the way you do. Because I button my collar behind is of no significance. Because I'm trying to help men to know their own souls gives me no superiority over them. That's as far as I can go — helping men to know themselves. Once that is accomplished, I can't guide their actions or influence their decisions. So far as I can determine, that's all God wants of us. He wants us to see ourselves in the light of truth; then, be honest with ourselves.

“In your particular matter, I couldn't stand by and see a man walk into danger unaware and yet it would mean a lot for me to betray another man's confidence. I suppose I'd do as I do in so many matters, and that is to compromise. I would consider it my duty to keep a confidence, if it was made in the spirit of honesty and, just as surely, it is my duty to save men from harm. My word of honor means much . . . yes. But my brother's safety, if I am his keeper, is of as much consequence, surely. If I couldn't compromise — if taking a middle course wouldn't be practical — then I think I would choose the cause which I considered most just and throw all my influence and energy into it.

“That's what I would do, my friend. Perhaps, it is not what you would do, but so long as you are honest in your perplexity then, basically, whatever action you decide on, must be right.”

Bayard drank again, slowly.

"I've never been inside your church," he said at length. "I'm like a lot of men. I don't care much about churches. Do you preach like that on Sunday?" — turning his face to Weyl.

The other laughed heartily.

"I don't preach, Bruce! I just talk and try to think out loud and make my people think. Yes. . . . I try to be before my people just as I am before you, or any other friend."

"Some day, then, I'm likely to come along and ask to throw in with your outfit . . . your church. I'll bet that after I've let a little more hell out of my system, I could get to be a top deacon in no time . . . in your church!"

The clergyman smiled and rested his hand affectionately on Bayard's knee.

"We're always glad to have stoppers come along," he replied. "Every now and then one drops in to see what we're like. Some have stayed and gone to work with us and turned out to be good hands."

Bruce made no response and the other was not the sort to urge. So they sat a time in companionable silence until the younger man asked,

"Had you come far to-day?"

"Wolf Basin. I went over there yesterday and married old Tom Nelson's girl to a newcomer over there."

Bayard looked at him keenly. He had wanted to

bring up another question, but had been unable to decide upon a device for the manipulation of the conversation. This was a fortunate opening.

"Did you hear the yarn they was tellin' 'bout old Newt Hagadorn, when they 'lected him justice of th' peace in Bumble Bee? At his first weddin' Newt got tangled up in his rope an' says,

" 'Who me 'nd God has j'ined together let no man put apart! ' "

Weyl threw back his head and laughed heartily. Bruce shook with mirth but watched his friend's face, and, when the clergyman had sobered again, he asked,

"How about this who-God-hath-joined-together idea anyhow, Parson? Does it always work out? "

"Not always, Bruce,"— with a shake of his head —
"You should know that."

"Well, when it don't, what've you parsons got to say about it? You've hogtied 'em in th' name of all that's holy; what if it don't turn out right? They're married in th' name of God, ain't they? "

Weyl drained the last of his pop and tossed the bottle away.

"I used to think they were . . . they all were, Bruce. That was when I was as young in years, as I try to be young in heart now. But the more couples I marry, the stronger is my conviction that God isn't a party to all those transactions, not by a long sight!

"If my bishop were to hear me say that, he'd have me up for a lecture, because he is bothered with a lot of

traditions and precedent, but many men are calling on Him to bless the unions of young men and women when He only refuses to answer. Men don't know; somehow they can't see that God turns his face from marriage at times; they keep on thinking that all that is necessary is to have some ordained minister warn society to keep hands off, that it is the Father's business . . . when it is not, when love, when God, isn't there."

"How are young goin' to tell when He's missin' from those present?"

Weyl shrugged his shoulders.

"The individuals, the parties concerned, are the only ones who know that."

"When they do know, when they don't give up even then? What are you goin' to do 'bout that?"

The other man shook his head sadly.

"There are many things that you and I — that society — must do, Bruce, my son. It's up to us to change our attitude, to change our way of looking at human relations, to pull off the bandages that are blinding our eyes and see the true God. Other things besides marriage demand that unerring sight, too. . . ."

"But what I'm gettin' at," broke in the other, pulling him back to the question of matrimony, "is, what are you goin' to do, when you know God ain't ridin' with a couple, when it's a sin for 'em to be together, but when th' man holds to his wife like I'd hold to a cow with my brand on her, an' when th' woman — maybe — hangs

to him 'cause she thinks th' Lord *has* had somethin' to do with it."

"In that case, if she thinks of the Father's connection as an affair of the past, she must know it is no longer holy; someone should open her eyes, someone who is unselfish, who has a perspective, who is willing to be patient and help her, to suffer with her, if need be."

"You wouldn't recommend that a party who sort of hankered to wring th' husband's neck an' who thought the wife was 'bout th' finest thing God ever put breath into, start out to tackle th' job, would you?"

Weyl rubbed his chin in thoughtful consideration; then replied slowly:

"No, it is our duty to give the blind sight; we can only do that by knowing that our motives are holy when we undertake the job. That is the first and only matter to consider. Beyond motives, we cannot judge men and women. . . .

"My bishop would drop dead before me, Bruce, if he heard that."

The other was silent a moment; then he said, slowly,

"I wish some of us miser'ble sinners could be so open minded as some of you God fearin', hell-preachin' church goers!"

After a long interval, in which their discussion rambled over a score of topics, Bayard left.

"If you ever get near th' Circle A in that chariot of fire, I hope she goes up in smoke, so you'll have to stay

a while!" he said. "An' I hope M's. Weyl's with you when it happens."

"Your wishes for bad luck are only offset by the hope that sometime we can come and spend some days with you, my friend!" laughed the minister as they shook hands.

Ann and Nora had returned when Bruce reached the Manzanita House and in the former's room a few moments later, after he had reported on Lytton's slow gaining of strength, Bayard said to her,

"Do you believe what I tell you, ma'am?"

She looked at him as though she did not get his meaning, but saw he was in earnest and replied,

"I've never doubted a thing you've told me."

"Then I want you to believe one more thing I'm goin' to tell you, an' I don't want you to ask me any questions about it, cause I'm so hogtied — that is, situated, ma'am — that I can't answer any. I just want to tell you never to let your husband go back to th' Sunset mine."

"Never to *let* him? Why, when he's himself again that's where his work will be —"

"I can't help that, ma'am. All I can say is, not to let him. It means more to you than anybody can think who don't know th' ways of men in a country like this. Just remember that, an' believe that, will you?"

"You want him to give up everything?"

"All I want, ma'am, is for you to say you'll never let him go there."

Finally, she unwillingly, uncomprehendingly, agreed to do all she could to prevent Ned's return to the mining camp.

"Then, that's all, for now," Bayard announced, dryly, and went from the room.

Their hands had not touched; there had been no word, no glance suggestive of the emotional outburst which characterized their last meeting, and, when he was gone, the woman, with all her conscience, felt a keen disappointment.

CHAPTER XI

THE STORY OF ABE

True to her promise to Bruce, Nora had taken Ann in hand. She proposed that they ride together the day after the man had suggested such a kindness and the step was met most enthusiastically by the eastern woman, for it promised her relief from the anxiety provoked by mere waiting.

"I know nothing about this, so you'll have to tell me everything, Nora," she said as, in a new riding skirt, she settled herself in the saddle and felt her horse move under her.

"I don't know much either," the girl replied, fussing with her blouse front. "I was learnt to ride by a fine teacher, but I was so busy learnin' 'bout him that I didn't pay much attention to what he said."

She looked up shyly, yet her mouth was set in determination and she forced herself to meet Ann Lytton's gaze, to will to be kind to her . . . because Bruce had asked it. Her thinly veiled declaration of interest in Bayard was not made without guile. It was a timid expression of her claim to a free field. Perhaps, beneath all her sense of having failed in the big ambition of her life, was a hope. This eastern woman

was married. Nora knew Bruce, knew his close adherence to his own code of morals, and she believed that something possibly might come to pass, some circumstance might arise which would take Ann out of their lives before the control that Bayard had built about his natural impulses could be broken down. That would leave her alone with the rancher, to worship him from a distance, to find a great solace in the fact that though he refused to be her lover no other woman was more intimately in his life. That hope prompted her mild insinuation of a right of priority.

Ann caught something of the subtle enmity which Nora could not wholly cover by her outward kindness. She had heard Nora's and Bruce's names associated about the hotel, and when, on speaking of Bayard, she saw her companion become more shy, felt her unconscious hostility increase perceptibly, she deduced the reason. With her conclusion came a feeling of resentment and with a decided shock Ann realized that she was prompted to be somewhat jealous of this daughter of the west. Indignant at herself for what she believed was a mean weakness she resolved to refrain from talking of Bruce to Nora for the sake of the girl's peace of mind, although she could not help wondering just how far the affair between the waitress and her own extraordinary lover had gone.

Keeping off the subject was difficult, for the two were so far apart, their viewpoints so widely removed, that they had little or no matter on which to converse, aside

from Yavapai and its people; and of the community Bayard was the outstanding feature for them both.

"How long have you been here, Nora?" Ann asked.

"Three years; ever since Bruce got me my job."

There you were!

"Do you like it here?"

"Well, folks have showed me a good time; Bruce especially."

Again the talk was stalled.

"Were you born out here?"

"Yes; that's why I ain't got much education . . . except what Bruce gave me."

Once more; everything on which they could converse went directly back to Bayard and, finally, Ann abandoned the attempt to avoid the embarrassing subject and plunged resolutely into it, hoping to dissipate the intangible barrier that was between them.

"Tell me about Bruce," she said. "He brought you here, he educated you; he must have been very kind to you. He must be unusual,"—looking at the other girl to detect, if she could, any misgiving sign.

Nora stared straight ahead.

"He's been good to me," she said slowly. "He's good to everybody, as I guess you know. The' ain't much to know about him. His name ain't Bayard; nobody knows what it is. He was picked up out of a railroad wreck a long time ago an' old Tim Bayard took him an' raised him. They never got track of his folks; th' wreck burnt.

"Tim died four years ago an' Bruce 's runnin' th' outfit. He's got a fine ranch!"—voice rising in unconscious enthusiasm. "He ain't rich, but he'll be well fixed some day. He don't care much about gettin' rich; says it takes too much time. He'd rather read an' fuss with horses an' things."

"Isn't it unusual to find a man out here or anywhere who feels like that? Are there more like him in this country, Nora?"

"God, no!"—with a roughness that startled her companion. "None of 'em are like him. He was born different; you can tell that by lookin' at him. He ain't their kind, but they all like him, you bet! *He's* smarter 'n they are. Feller from th' East, a perfesser, come out here with th' consumption once when Tim was alive an' stayed there; he taught Bruce lots. My!"—with a sigh of mingled pride and hopelessness—"he sure knows a lot. Just as if he was raised an' educated in th' East, only with none of th' frills you folks get."

Then she was silent and refused to respond readily to Ann's advances, but rode looking at her pony's ears, her lips in a straight line.

That was the beginning. Each day the two women rode together, Nora teaching Ann all she knew of horses and showing her, in her own way, the mighty beauty of that country.

After the first time, they said little about Bruce; with a better acquaintance, more matters could be talked about and for that each was thankful.

Removed as they were from one another by birth and training, each of these two women, strangers until within a few days, found that a great part of her life was identical with that of the other. Yet, at the very point where they came closest to one another, divergence began again. Their common interest was their feeling for Bruce Bayard, and their greatest difference was the manner in which each reacted to the emotion. The waitress, more elemental, more direct and child-like, wanted the man with an unequivocal desire. She would have gone through any ordeal, subjected herself to any ignominious circumstances, for his pleasure. But she did not want him as a possession, as something which belonged to her; she wanted him for a master, longed with every fiber of her sensory system to belong to him. She would have slaved for him, drudged for him, received any brutal outburst he might have turned on her, gratefully, just so long as she knew she was his.

Ann Lytton, complicated in her manner of thought by the life she had lived, hampered by conventions, by preconceived standards of conduct, would not let herself be whiffed about so wholly by emotion. It was as though she braced backward and moved reluctantly before a high wind, urged to flight, resisting the tugging by all the strength of her limbs, yet losing control with every reluctant step. For her, also, Bruce Bayard was the most wonderful human being that she had ever experienced. His roughness, his little uncouth touches, did not jar on her highly sensitized appreciation of

proprieties. With another individual of a weaker or less cleanly type, the slips in grammar, even, would have been annoying; but his virility and his unsmirched manner of thought, his robust, clean body, overbalanced those shortcomings and, deep in her heart, she idolized him. And yet she would not go further, would not willingly let that emotion come into the light where it could thrive and grow with the days; she tried to repress it, keeping it from its natural sources of nourishment and thereby its growth — for it would grow in spite of her — became a disrupting progress. One part of her, the real, natural, unhampered Ann, told her that for his embraces, for his companionship, she would sell her chances of eternity; she had no desire to own him, no urge to subject herself to him; the status she wanted was equal footing, a shoulder-to-shoulder relationship that would be a joyous thing. And yet that other part, that Puritanical Ann, resisted, fought down this urge, told her that she must not, could not want Bayard because, at the Circle A ranch, waited another man who, in the eyes of the law, of other people, of her God, even, was the one who owned her loyalty and devotion even though he could not claim her love. Strange the ways of women who will guard so zealously their bodies but who will struggle against every natural, holy influence to give so recklessly, so uselessly, so hopelessly, of their souls!

Nora was the quicker to analyze her companion-

rival. Her subjection to Bayard's every whim was so complete that, when he told her to be kind to this other woman, she obeyed with all the heart she could muster, in spite of what she read in his face and in Ann's blue eyes when that latter-day part of the eastern woman dreamed through them. She went about her task doggedly, methodically, forcing herself to nurse the bond between these two, thinking not of the future, of what it meant to her own relationships with the cattleman, of nothing but the fact that Bayard, the lover of her dreams, had willed it. The girl was a religious fanatic; her religion was that of service to Bayard and she tortured herself in the name of that belief.

And in that she was only reflecting the spirit of the man she loved. Back at the ranch, Bayard underwent the same ordeal of repressing his natural desires, only, in his case, he could not at all times control his revulsion for Lytton, while Nora kept her jealousy well in hand. As at first, he centered his whole activity about bringing Lytton back to some semblance of manhood. He nursed him, humored him as much as he could, watched him constantly to see that the man did not slip away, go to Yavapai and there, in an hour, undo all that Bruce had accomplished.

Lytton regained strength slowly. His nervous system, racked and torn by his relentless dissipation, would not allow his body to mend rapidly. He had been on the verge of acute alcoholism; another day or two of

continued debauchery would have left him a bundle of uncontrollable nerves, and remedying the condition was no one day task. A fortnight passed before Lytton was able to sit up through the entire day and, even then, a walk of a hundred yards would bring him back pale and panting.

Meager as his daily improvement was, nevertheless it was progress, and the rehabilitation of his strength meant only one thing for Bruce Bayard. It meant that Lytton, within a short time, must know of Ann's presence, must go to her, and that, thereafter, Bayard would be excluded from the woman's presence, for he still felt that to see them together would strip him of self-restraint, would make him a primitive man, battling blindly for the woman he desired.

As the days passed and Bruce saw Lytton steadying, gaining physical and mental force, his composure, already disturbed, was badly shaken. He tried to tell himself that what must be, must be; that brooding would help matters not at all, that he must keep up his courage and surrender gracefully for the sake of the woman he loved, keeping her peace of mind sacred. At other times, he went over the doctrine of unimpeachable motive, of individual duty that the clergyman had expounded, but some inherent reluctance to adopt the new, some latent conservatism in him rebelled at thought of man's crossing man where a woman was at stake. He did not know, but he formed the third being who was held to a rigid course by conscience! Of the

four entangled by this situation, Ned Lytton alone was without scruples, without a code of ethics.

Between the two men was the same attitude that had prevailed from the first. Bayard kept Lytton in restraint by his physical and mental dominance. He gave up attempting to persuade, attempting to appeal to the spark of manhood left in his patient, after that day when Lytton stole and drank the whiskey. He relied entirely on his superiority and frankly kept his charge in subjection. When strength came back to the debauched body, Bayard told himself, he could begin to plead, to argue for his results; not before.

For the greater portion of the time Lytton was morose, quarrelsome. Now and again came flashes of a better nature, but invariably they were followed by spiteful, reasonless outbursts and remonstrances. To these Bayard listened with tolerance, accepting the other man's curses and insults as he would the reasonless pet of a child, and each time that Ned showed a desire to act as a normal human being, to interest himself in life or the things about him, the big rancher was on the alert to give information, to encourage thought that would take the sick man's mind from his own difficulties.

One factor of the life at the ranch evidently worried Lytton, but of it he did not speak. This was the manner with which Bayard kept one room, the room in which he slept, to himself. The door through which he entered never stood open, Lytton was never asked

to cross the sill. Bayard never referred to it in conversation. A secret chamber, it was, rendered mysterious by the fact that its occupant took pains that it should never be mentioned. Lytton instinctively respected this attitude and never asked a question touching on it, though at times his annoyance at being so completely excluded from a portion of the house was evident.

Once Lytton, sitting in the shade of the ash tree, watched Bayard riding in from the valley on his sorrel horse. The animal nickered as his master let him head for the well beside the house.

"He likes to drink here," Bruce laughed, dropping off and wiping the dust from his face. "He thinks that because this well's beside the house, it's better than drinkin' out yonder in th' corral. Kind of a stuck up old pup, ain't you, Abe?" slapping the horse's belly until he lifted one hind foot high in a meaningless threat of destruction. "Put down that foot you four-flusher!" setting his boot over the hoof and forcing it back to earth.

He pulled off the saddle, dropped it, drew the bridle over the sleek, finely proportioned ears and let the big beast shake himself mightily, roll in the dooryard dust and drink again.

"Where'd he come from?" Lytton asked, after staring at the splendid lines of the animal for several minutes.

"Oh, Abe run hog-wild out on th' valley," Bayard

answered, with a laugh, waving his hand out toward the expanse of country, now a fine lilac tinted with green under the brilliant sunlight, purple and uncertain away out where the heat waves distorted the horizon. "He was a hell bender of a horse for a while. . . .

"You see, he come from some stock that wasn't intended to get out. Probably, an army stallion got away from some officer at Whipple Barracks and fell in with a range mare. That kind of a sire accounts for his weight and that head and neck, an' his mammy must have been a leather-lunged, steel-legged little cuss — 'cause he's that, too. He's got the lines of a fine bred horse, with the insides of a first class bronc.

"He attracted attention when he was a two year old and some of th' boys tried to get him, but couldn't. They kept after him until he was four and then sort of give up. He was a good horse gone bad. He drove off gentle mares and caused all kind of trouble and would 'a been shot, if he hadn't been so well put up. He was no use at all that way; he was a peace disturber an' he was fast an' wise. That's a bad combination to beat in a country like ours," — with another gesture toward the valley.

"But his fifth summer was th' dry year — no rain — creeks dryin' up — hell on horses; Tim and I went to get him.

"There was just three waterin' places left on that range. One on Lynch Creek, one under Bald Mountain, other way over by Sugar Block. We fenced the

first two in tight so nothin' but birds could get to 'em, built a corral around th' third, that was clean across th' valley there,"—indicating as he talked—"an' left th' gate open.

"Well, first day all th' horses on th' valley collected over other side by those fenced holes, wonderin' what was up,"—he scratched his head and grinned at the memory, "an' Tim and I set out by Sugar Block in th' sun waitin'. . . . Lord, it was hot, an' there wasn't no shade to be had. That night, some of the old mares come trailin' across th' valley leadin' their colts, whinerin' when they smelled water. We was sleepin' nearby and could kind 'a' see 'em by th' starlight. They nosed around th' corral and finally went in and drunk. Next day, th' others was hangin' in sight, suspicious, an' too thirsty to graze. All of 'em stood head toward th' water, lookin' an' lookin' hours at a time. 'Long toward night in they come, one at a time, finally, with a rush; unbranded mares, a few big young colts, all drove to it by thirst.

"Old Abe, though, he stood up on th' far rim of a wash an' watched an' hollered an' trotted back an' forth. He wouldn't come; not much! We had a glass an' could see him switch his tail an' run back a little ways with his ears flat down. Then, he'd stop an' turn his head an' stick up his ears stiff as starch; then he'd turn 'round an' walk towards us, slow for a few steps. Never got within pistol shot, though. All next day he hung there alone, watchin' us, dryin' up to

his bones under that sun. Antelope come up, a dozen in a bunch, an' hung near him all afternoon. Next mornin' come th' sun an' there was Mr. Abe, standin' with his neck straight in th' air, ears peekin' at our camp to see if we was there yet. Gosh, how hot it got that day!" He rose, drew a bucket of water from the well and lifting it in his big hands, drank deeply from the rim at the memory.

"I thought it was goin' to burn th' valley up.

" 'This'll bring him,' says Tim.

" 'Not him,' I says! 'He'll die first.'

" 'He's too damn good a sport to die,' Tim said. 'He'll quit when he's licked.'

"An' he did."

The man walked to the sorrel, who stood still idly switching at flies. He threw his arm about the great head and the horse, swaying forward, pushed against his body with playful affection until Bayard was shoved from his footing.

"You did, didn't you, Abe? He didn't wait for dark. It was still light an' after waitin' all that time on us, you'd thought he'd stuck it out until we couldn't see so well. But it seemed as if Tim was right, as if he quit when he saw he was licked, like a good sport. He just disappeared into that wash an' come up on th' near side an' walked slow toward us, stoppin' now an' then, sidesteppin' like he was goin' to turn back, but always comin' on an' on. He made a big circle toward the corral an', when he got close, 'bout fifty yards off,

he started to trot an' he went through that gate on a high lope, comin' to stop plumb in th' middle of that hole, spatterin' water an' mud all over himself an' half th' country.

" 'T wasn't much then. We made it to th' gate on our horses. He could see us, but we knew after bein' dried out that long he'd just naturally have to fill up. When I reached for th' gate, he made one move like he tried to get away but 'twas too late. We had him trapped. He was licked. He looked us over an' then went to lay down in th' water."

He stroked the long, fine neck slowly.

"After that 't was easy. I knew he was more or less man even if he was horse. We put th' first rope on him he'd ever felt next mornin'. Of course, 't was kind of a tournament for a while, but, finally we both tied on an' started home with him between us. He played around some, but finally let up; not licked, not discouraged, understand, but just as if he admitted we had one on him an' he was goin' to see our game through for curiosity.

"We put him in th' round corral an' left him there for a straight month, foolin' with him every day, of course. Then I got up an' rode him. That's all there is to it.

"He was my best friend th' minute I tied on to him; he is yet. We never had no trouble. I treat him square an' white. He's never tried to pitch with me, never has quit runnin' until I told him to, an', for my

part, I've never abused him or asked him to go th' limit."

He walked out to the corral then, horse following at his heels like a dog, nosing the big brown hand that swung against Bayard's thigh.

"That's always been a lesson to me," Bruce said, on his return as he prepared to wash in the tin basin beside the wall. "Runnin' hog-wild never got him nothin' but enemies, never did him no good. He found out that it didn't pay, that men was too much for him, an' he's a lot happier, lot better off, lot more comfortable than he was when he was hellin' round with no restraint on him. He knows that. I can tell.

"So,"—as he lathered his hands with soap—"I've always figured that when us men got runnin' too loose we was makin' mistakes, losin' a lot. It may seem a little hard on us to stop doin' what we've had a good time doin' for a while, but, when you stop to consider all sides, I guess there's about as much pleasure for us when we think of others as there is when we're so selfish that we don't see nothin' but our own desires."

Lytton stirred uneasily in his chair and tossed his chin scornfully.

"Don't you ever get tired playing the hero?" he taunted. "That's what you are, you know. You're the hero; I'm the villain. You're the one who's always saying the things heroes say in books. You're the one who's always right, while I'm always wrong.

"You know, Bayard, when a man gets to be so

damn heroic it's time he watched himself. I've never seen one yet whose foot didn't slip sooner or later. The higher you fly, understand, the harder you fall. You're pretty high; mighty superior to most of us. Look out! "

The other regarded him a moment, cheeks flushing slowly under the taunt.

"Lytton, if I was to ask a favor of you, would you consider it? "

"Fire away! The devil alone knows what *I* could do for anybody."

"Just this. Be careful of me, please. I might, sometime, sort of choke you or something! "

He turned back to the wash basin at that and soused his face and head in the cold water.

A moment before he had looked through that red film which makes killers of gentle men. He had mastered himself at the cost of a mighty effort, but in the wake of his rage came a fresh loathing for that other man . . . the man he was grooming, rehabilitating, only to blot out the possibility of having a bit of Ann's life for himself. He was putting his best heart, his best mind, his best strength into that discouraging task, hoping against hope that he might lift Lytton to a level where Ann would find something to attract and hold her, something to safeguard her against the true lover who might ride past on his fire-shod stallion. And it was bitter work.

CHAPTER XII

THE RUNAWAY

During these days Bayard saw Ann regularly. He would be up before dawn that he might do the necessary riding after his cattle and reach Yavapai before sunset, because, somehow, he felt that to see another man's wife by daylight was less of a transgression than though he went under cover of darkness. Perhaps it was also because he feared that in spite of his caution to keep Ann's identity secret, in spite of the community's accepted first conclusion, Yavapai might learn that she was wife and not sister, and wished to fortify her against the sting of comment that might be passed should the revelation occur and his affection for her be guessed.

He was punctilious about his appearance. Invariably he changed shirts and overalls before riding to the town, and he had reserved one gorgeous green silk scarf for those occasions. He never appeared before the woman unshaven and, since his one confessional outburst, he was as careful of his speech, his manner, as he was of his person.

Ann had taken to Arizona whole heartedly and dressed suitably for the new life she was leading — divided skirts, simple blouses, a brimmed hat that would

shade her eyes. Her cheeks bronzed from sun and wind, the blood pumped closer to her skin from the outdoor life and her eyes, above the latent pain in their depths, took on the brilliance of health. Her new manner of dress, the better color that came to her face and accentuated her beauty, the growing indications of vitality about her, served only to fan the flame in Bayard's heart, for as it made her more attractive to him, it also made her more understandable, brought her nearer to his virile kind.

"I've come to tell you about him, ma'am," he always said, by way of opening their conversations.

Not once again did he call her by her given name, but, though he was always formal, stiffly polite, never allowing an intimation of personal regard to pass his lips, he could not hide the adoration in his eyes. It came through his dogged resolution to hold it back, for he could not keep his gaze from following her every move, every bend of her neck, change of her lips, lift of her arms and shoulders or free, rhythmic movement as she walked.

Ann saw and read that light and, though something in her kept demanding that she blind herself to its significance, that, if necessary to accomplish this, she refuse to give Bayard gaze for gaze, she could no more have hidden the fact of that evidence of his love from her understanding than she could have stopped the quickening of her pulse when he approached.

Nora saw that light, too. She saw the trouble with

it in his face; and the realization of what it all meant was like a stab in the breast. He had ceased entirely to laugh and banter with her as he had done before Ann Lytton came to Yavapai; in other days he had always eaten at the Manzanita House when in town, and his humorous chiding had been one of the things in which the girl found simple delight. Now, he came and went without eating; his words to her were few, almost without exception they were of the other woman and, always, his speech was sober.

Mrs. Weyl returned to Yavapai and with her coming Ann found another outlet for the trouble that she fought vainly to repress. To Bayard she had given the fullest detail of her confidence; through Nora she had found a method of forgetting for short successions of hours. But Bayard was a man, and between them was the peculiar barrier which his love had erected; Nora was not the type to which Ann would go for comfort and there, anyhow, was again a dividing circumstance which could not wholly be overcome. It was the emotional receptiveness of an understanding woman that Ann Lytton needed; she wanted to be mothered, to be pitied, to be assured in the terms of her kind and all that she found in the clergyman's wife.

"Why, the poor child!" that good woman had cried when, on her arrival home, her husband had told her of Ann's presence. "And you say her brother has disappeared?"

"From Yavapai, yes; I suspect, though, that Bruce

Bayard knows something of where he is and I guess the girl could find him. Something peculiar about it, though. Bruce is worried. And I think he's quite desperately in love."

Forthwith, his wife dropped all other duties and went to Ann. In fifteen minutes the novelty of acquaintance had worn off and in an hour Ann was crying in the motherly arms, while she poured her whole wretched story into the sympathetic ears; that is, all of the story up to the day when Bruce Bayard told her why she must not help him nurse Ned Lytton back to physical and moral health.

To the accompaniment of many there-there's and dear-child's and caresses Ann's outburst of grief spent itself and the distress that had reflected on the countenance of the older woman gave way to an expression of sweet understanding.

"And because of everything, we — Mr. Bayard and I — had thought it best to let people go on thinking that I am . . . Ned's sister. . . . You see, it might be embarrassing to have them talk."

Her look wavered and the face of Mrs. Weyl showed a sudden comprehension. For a breath she sat gazing at the profile of the girl beside her. Then she leaned forward, kissed her on the cheek and said,

"I know, daughter, I know."

That meeting led to daily visits and soon Bruce and Ann were invited to eat their evening meal at the

Weyls'. It was a peculiar event, with the self-consciousness of Ann and the rancher putting an effective damper on the conversation. Afterward, when the men sat outside in the twilight, Bruce smoking a cigarette and the minister drawing temperately on an aged cob pipe, the cowman broke a lengthy silence with:

"I'm glad she told your wife . . . about bein' his wife. . . . It relieves me. A thing like that is considerable of a secret to pack around."

The other blew ashes gently from the bowl of his pipe, exposing the ruby coal before he spoke.

"If you ever think there's anything any man can do to help — from listening on up — just let me try, will you, my boy?"

"If any man could help, you'd be the one," was the answer. "But th' other day we sifted this thing down; it's up to th' man himself to be sure that he's ridin' th' open trail an' ain't got anything to cover up."

"But lately so much has happened that I don't feel free, even when I'm out on the valley. I feel, somehow, like I was under fence . . . fenced in."

Nora and Ann continued their rides together and one afternoon they had gone to the westward in the direction of Bayard's ranch. It was at Nora's suggestion, after they had agreed that Bruce might be on his way to Yavapai that day. In the distance, they had sighted a rider and after watching him a time saw him wave his hat.

"That's him," the waitress said. "Here's some fine grass; let's give th' horses a bite an' let 'em cool till he comes up."

They waited there then, slouched in their saddles. Ann wanted to talk about something other than Bruce, because, at the mention of his name, that old chill was bound to assert itself in Nora.

"This is a better horse than the one I've had," she commented, stroking the pony's withers and hoping to start talk that would make the interval of waiting one of ease between them.

"Yes," agreed Nora, "but he's got a bad eye. I was afraid of him when we first started out, but he seems to be all right. Bruce had one that looked like him once an' he tried to pitch me off."

"Hold up your head, pony," Ann said, "You'll get us into trouble —"

Her horse, searching grass, had thrust his head under the pony Nora rode and, as Ann pulled on the reins, he responded with the alacrity of a nervous animal, striking the stirrup as he threw up his head. He crouched, backed, half turned and Nora's spur caught under the headstall of his bridle. It was a bridle without a throat-latch, and, at the first jerk, it slipped over his ears, the bit slid from his mouth and clattered on the rocks. Ann's first laugh changed to a cry of fright. Nora, with a jab of her spurs, started to send her pony close against the other, reaching out at the same time with her arms to encircle his head. But she was too

late, too slow. The freed horse trotted off a few steps, throwing his nose to one side in curiosity, felt no restraint, broke into a lope, struck back along the road toward town and, surprised, frightened by his unexpected liberty, increased his pace to a panicky run.

Behind, Nora pulled her horse up sharply, knowing that to pursue would only set the runaway at a greater speed.

"Hang on!" she shouted, in a voice shrill with excitement. "Hang on!"

Ann was hanging on with all her strength. She was riding, too, with all the skill at her command; for greater safety she clung to the horn with both hands. She tried to speak to the horse under her, thinking that she might quiet him by words, but the rush of wind whipped the feeble sounds from her lips and their remnants were drowned in the staccatoed drumming of hoofs as the crazed beast, breathing in excited gulps, breasted the hill that led them back toward town, gathering speed with every leap that carried them forward.

Nora, seeing that a runaway was inevitable, cried to her mount and the pony, keyed to flight, sped along behind the other, losing with every length traveled. Tears of fright spilled from the girl's eyes, chilling her cheeks. What might happen was incalculable, she knew.

Then new sounds, above the beat of her horse's hoofs, above the wind in her ears; the sweeping, meas-

ured, rolling batter of other hoofs, and Nora turned her head to see Bruce Bayard, mouth set, eyes glowing, brim of his hat plastered back against the crown by his rush, urge his big sorrel horse toward her. He hung low over the fork of his saddle, clear of his seat, tense, yet lithe, and responding to every undulation of the beast that carried him.

From a distance Bayard had seen. He thought at first that Ann had started her pony purposely, but when the animal raced away toward town at such frantic speed, when Ann's hat was whipped from her head, when he heard a distant, faint scream, he knew that no prompting of the woman's had been behind the break. He stretched himself low over Abe's neck and cried aloud, hung in his spurs and fanned the great beast's flanks with his quirt. Never before had the sorrel been called upon so sharply; never before had he felt such a prodding of rowels or lashing of rawhide. Ears back, nose out, limbs flexing and straightening, spurning the roadway with his drumming hoofs, the great animal started in pursuit.

For a mile the road held up hill, following closely the rim of a rise that hung high above the valley to the right. As it rose, the wagon track bent to the left, with the trend of the rim. At the crest of the hill Yavapai would be visible; from there the road, too, could be seen, swinging in a big arc toward the town, which might be reached by travel over a straight line; but that way would lead down an abrupt drop and over

footing that was atrocious, strewn with *malpais* boulders and rutted by many washes.

It was to overtake Ann's runaway before he topped this rise that Bayard whipped his sorrel. He knew what might happen there. The animal that bore the woman was crazed beyond control, beyond his own horse judgment. He was running, and his sole objective was home. Now, he was taking the quickest possible route and the moment he struck the higher country he might leave the road and go straight for Yavapai, plunging down the sharp point that stood three hundred feet above the valley, and making over the rocks with the abandon of a beast that is bred and reared among them. Well enough to run over rough ground at most times, but in this insane going the horse would be heedless of his instinctive caution, sacrificing everything for speed. He might fall before he reached the valley floor, he might lose his footing at any yard between there and town, and a fall in that ragged, volcanic rock, would be a terrible thing for a woman.

Abe responded superbly to the urging. He passed Nora's pony in a shower of gravel. His belly seemed to hang unbelievably close to the ground, his stride lengthened, his tail stood rippling behind him, his feet smote the road as though spitefully and he stretched his white patched nose far out as if he would force his tendons to a performance beyond their actual power. But he could not make it; the task of overcoming that

handicap in that distance was beyond the ability of blood and bone.

As he went on, leap by leap, and saw that his gaining was not bringing him beside Ann in time, Bayard commenced to call aloud to the horse under him, and his eyes grew wide with dread.

His fears were well grounded. As though he had planned it long before, as if the whole route of his flight had been preconceived, the black pony swung to the right as he came up on level ground. He cut across the intervening flat and, ears back, hindquarters scrooching far under his body as he changed his gait for the steep drop, he disappeared over the rim.

Bayard cried aloud, the sorrel swung unbidden on the trail of the runaway and twenty yards behind stuck his fore feet stiffly out for the first leap down the rock-littered point. Unspeakable footing, that. *Malpais* lumps, ranging from the size of an egg to some that weighed tons, were everywhere. Between them sparse grass grew, but in no place was there bare ground the size of a horse's hoof, and for every four lengths they traveled forward, they dropped toward the valley by one!

Ears up now, the sorrel watched his footing anxiously, but the black pony, eyes rolling, put his whole vigor into the running, urged on to even greater efforts by the nearness of the pursuing animal. The fortune that goes with flying bronchos alone kept his feet beneath his body.

Bayard's mouth was open and each time the shock of being thrown forward and down racked his body, the breath was beaten from him. He looked ahead, watching the footing at the bottom, leaving that over which they then passed to his horse, for the most critical moment in a run such as they took is when the horses strike level ground. Then they are apt to go end over end, tripped by the impetus that their rush downhill gives them. He knew that he could not overtake and turn Ann's pony with safety before they reached the bottom. He feared that to come abreast of him might drive the frantic beast to that last effort which would result in an immediate fall. Every instant was precious; every leap filled with potential disaster.

The stallion left off pretense at clean running. He slipped and floundered and scrambled down the point; at times almost sitting on his haunches to keep the rush of his descent within safety and retain control of his balance. Slowly he drew closer to the other animal, crowding a bit to the left to be nearer, grunting with his straining, dividing his attention between preserving caution and making progress.

Ann's hair came down, tumbling about her shoulders, then down her back, and finally brushed the sweated coat of her runaway with its ends. The horrible sensation of falling, of pitching forward helplessly, swept through her vitals each time the animal under her leaped outward and down. It grew to an acute physical pain by its constant repetition. Her face was very

white, but almost expressionless. Only her eyes betrayed the fear in her by their darkness, by their strained lids. Her mouth was fixed in determination to play the game to its end. She heard the other horse coming; Bayard's voice had called out to her. That was all she knew. This flight was horrible, tragic; with each move of her horse she feared that it must be the last, that she would be flung into those rocks, yet, somehow, she felt that it would end well. For Bayard was near her.

Not so with the man. As they slid down halfway to the valley, he cried aloud to his horse again, for he saw that along the base of the drop, right at the place toward which they were floundering, a recent storm had gouged a fresh wash. Deep and narrow and rock filled, and, if her horse, unable to stop, unable to turn with any degree of safety whatever went into that . . .

Behind them, loosened rocks clattered along, the dust rose, their trail was marked by black blotches where the scant red soil had been turned up. The sorrel's nose reached the black's reeling rump; it stretched to his flank, to the saddle, to his shoulder. . . . And Ann turned her head quickly, appealingly.

"Careful . . . Abe! Once more . . . easy . . ."

Bayard dropped his reins; he leaned to the left. He scratched with his spurs. His horse leaped powerfully twice, thrice, caution abandoned, risking everything now. The man swung down, his arm encircled

Ann's waist, he brought the pressure of his right knee to bear against the saddle, and lifted her clear, a warm, limp weight against his body.

Staggering under the added burden, the stallion gathered himself for a try at the wash which he must either clear or in which he and those he carried were to fall in a tangle. Bayard, lifting the woman high, balanced in his saddle and gathered her closer.

The black floundered in uncertain jumps, throwing his head down in an effort to check his progress, was overcome by his own momentum and leaped recklessly. He misjudged, fell short and with a grunt and a thud and a threshing went down into the bald rocks that floods had piled in the gully.

Abe did not try to stop, to overcome the added impetus that this new weight gave him. He lowered his head in a show of determination, took the last three strides with a swift scramble and leaped.

Bayard thought that they were in the air for seconds. They seemed to float over that wash. Seemed to hang suspended a deliberate instant. Then they came down with a sob wrenched from the horse as his forefeet clawed the far footing for a retaining hold and his hindquarters, the bank crumbling under them, slipped down into the gully. He strained an instant against sliding further back, gathering himself in an agony of effort and floundered safely up!

Bruce became conscious that Ann's arms were about

his neck, that her body was close against his. He knew that his limbs quivered, partly from the recent fright, partly from contact with the woman.

Abe staggered forward a few steps, halted and turned to look at his unfortunate brother galloping lamely toward Yavapai.

Except for the animal's breathing, the world was very quiet. For a moment Ann lay in Bayard's embrace; his one arm was about her shoulders, the other hooked behind her knees; then, convulsively, her arms tightened about his neck; she pressed her cheek against his and clung so while their hearts throbbed, one against the other. He had not moved, he refrained from crushing her, from taking her lips with his. It cost him dearly and the effort to resist shot another tremor through his frame. On that she roused.

"I wasn't afraid . . . after I knew it was you," she said, raising her head.

"I was, ma'am," he said, soberly, lifting and seating her on Abe's withers.

"I was mighty scared. See what happened to your horse? That . . . You'd have been with him in those rocks."

He dismounted, still supporting her in her position.

"You sit in th' saddle, ma'am; I'll walk an' lead Abe. You're . . . you're not scared now?"

"A little,"—breathing deeply as he helped her, and, laughing in a strained tone. "I'll . . . I'll be frightened later I expect, but I'm not now . . . much. . . ."

It's you, you keep me from it," she said. "I'm not frightened with you."

"I tried to keep things so you won't have to be, ma'am."

Probably because she was weak, perhaps wholly because of the hot yearning that contact with him had roused in her, Ann swayed down toward him. It was as though she would fall into his arms, as though she herself would stir his repressed desire for her until it overcame his own judgment, and yield to his will there in the brilliant afternoon; as though she were going to him, then, for all time, regardless of everything, caring only for the instant that her lips should be on his. He started forward, flung up one arm as though to catch her; then drew back.

"Don't, ma'am," he begged. "Don't! For the sake . . . for your sake, don't."

The woman swallowed and straightened her back as though just coming to the complete realization of what had happened.

"Forgive me," she whispered.

They had not heard Nora riding down to them, so great was their absorption in one another, but at that moment when Ann's head drooped and Bayard's shoulders flexed as from a great fatigue the waitress halted her horse beside them.

"God! I didn't think. . . ."

She had looked at them with the fear that had struck her as she watched the last phase of their

descent still gripping her. But in their faces she read that which they both struggled to hide from one another and the light that had been in her eyes went out. She turned her face away from them, looking out at the long afternoon shadows.

"I'll have to be gettin' back," she said, dully, as though unconscious of the words.

"We'll go with you, Nora," the man said, very quietly. "Mrs. Lytton," he pronounced the words distinctly as if to impress himself with their significance — "is the first person who has ever been on Abe but me. . . . He seems to like it."

Leading the horse by the reins, he began to climb the point back toward the road. In the east the runaway had dwindled to a bobbing fleck.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SCOURGING

In the last moments of twilight Ann sat alone in her room, cheeks still flushed, limbs still trembling at intervals, pulses retaining their swift measure. She was unstrung, aquiver with strange emotions.

It was not wholly the fright of the afternoon that had provoked her nerves to this state; it was not alone the emotional surging loosed by her moment in Bayard's arms, her cheek against his cheek; nor was it entirely inspired by the fact, growing in portent with each passing hour, that Bruce had told her his work with Ned Lytton was all but ended, that within a day or two he was sending her husband to her. It was a combination of all this, with possibly her husband's impending return forming a background.

Again and again she saw Bruce as he delivered his message, heard his even, dogged voice uttering the words. He had waited until they reached the hotel, he had let Nora leave them and, then, in the sunset quiet, standing on the steps where she had first seen him, he had refused to hear her thanks for saving her from bodily hurt, and had broken in:

"It ain't likely I'll be in again for a while, ma'am. Your husband's about ready to move. I've done all I can; it'd only hurt him to stay on against his will. Sometime this week, ma'am, he'll be comin'."

And that was Wednesday! She had been struck stupid by his words. She had heard him no further, though he did say other things; she had watched him go, unable to call him back.

It relieved Ann not at all to tell herself that it was this for which she had waited, had worried, had restrained herself throughout these weeks; that she had come West to find her husband and that she was about to join him, knowing that he was strengthened, that he had been lifted up to a physical and mental level where she might guide him, aid him in the fight which must continue.

That knowledge was no solace. It was that for which she had outwardly waited, but it was that against which she inwardly recoiled. She realized this truth now, and conscience cried back that it must not be so, that she must stifle that feeling of revulsion, that she must welcome her husband, eagerly, gladly. And it went on to accuse . . . that conscience; it shamed her because she had been held to the breast of another man; it scorned her because she had drawn herself closer to him with her own arms; it taunted her bitterly because she could not readily agree with her older self that in the doing she had sinned, because to her slowly

opening eyes that moment had seemed the most beautiful interval of her life!

A peculiar difference in the vivacity of her impressions had been asserting itself. The memory of the runaway had faded. Her picture of the moment when she strained her body against Bayard's was not so clear as it had been an hour before, though the thrill, the great joy of it, still remained to mingle with those other thoughts and emotions which confused her. The last great impression of the day, though — Bayard's solemn announcement of his completed task — grew more sharply defined, more outstanding, more important as the moments passed, because its eventuality was a thing before which she felt powerless in the face of her conscience, before which all this other must be forgotten, before which this new rebellious Ann must give way to the old long-suffering, submissive wife. She felt as though she had known her moment of beauty and that it had gone, leaving her not even a sweet memory; for her grimmer self whispered that that brief span of time had been vile, unchaste. And yet, in the next moment, her strength had rallied and she was fighting against the influence of tradition, against blind precedents.

A knock came on her door and Ann, wondering with a thrill if it could be Bayard, both troubled and pleased at the possibility, stepped across the floor to answer it.

"Oh, Nora!" she said in surprise. "Come in,"—when the girl stood still in the hall, neither offering to speak nor to enter. "Do come in," she insisted after a pause and the other crossed the threshold, still without speaking.

"I've been sitting here in the dark thinking about what happened this afternoon," Ann said, drawing a chair to face hers that was by the window. "It was all very exciting, wasn't it?"

Nora had followed across the room slowly and Ann felt that the girl's gaze held on her with unusual steadfastness.

"I guess it's a fortunate thing that Bruce Bayard came along when he did. I . . . I tremble every time I think of the way my horse went down!" She broke off and laughed nervously.

Nora stood before her, still silent, still eyeing her pointedly.

"Well . . . Won't you sit down, Nora?"—confused by the portentous silence and the staring of the other. "Won't you sit down here?"

Mechanically the girl took her seat and Ann, wondering what this strange bearing might mean, resumed her own chair. They sat so, facing one another in the last sunset glow, the one staring stolidly, Ann covering her embarrassment, her wonder with a forced smile. Gradually, that smile faded, an uncertainty appeared in Ann's eyes and she broke out:

"Why, what is the matter with you, Nora?"

At that question the girl averted her face and let her hands drop down over the chair arms with careless laxity.

"Don't you know what it is?" she asked, in her deep, throaty voice, meeting Ann's inquiring gaze, shifting her eyes quickly, moving her shoulders with a slight suggestion of defiance.

"Why, no, Nora! You're so queer. Is something troubling you? Can't you tell me?"

Ann leaned forward solicitously.

The waitress laughed sharply, and lifted a hand to her brow, and shook her head.

"Don't you know what it is?" she asked again, voice hardening. "Can't you see? Are you blind? Or are you afraid?"

"What'd you come out here for anyhow?" she cried, abruptly accusing, one hand out in a gesture of challenge, and Ann could see an angry flush come into her face and her lower lids puff with the emotion.

"Why, Nora. . . ."

"Don't tell me! I know what you come for! You come to look after your worthless whelp of a man; that's why; an' you stayed to try to take mine!"—voice weakening as she again turned her face toward the window.

"Why, Nora Brewster . . ."

The sharp shake of the girl's arm threw off Ann's hand that had gone out to grasp it and the rasp in Nora's voice checked the eastern woman's protest.

"Don't try to tell me anything different! I know! Can't I see? Am I as blind as you try to make me think you are?"—with another swagger of the shoulders as she moved in her chair. "Can't I see what's goin' on? Can't I see you makin' up to him an' eyein' him an' leadin' him on?—You, a married woman!"

"Nora, stop it!"

With set mouth Ann straightened, her breathing audible.

"I *won't* stop. You're goin' to hear me through, understand? You're goin' to know all about it; you're goin' to know what I am an' what he is an' what's been between us . . . what you've been breakin' up. Then, I guess you won't come in here with your swell eastern ways an' try to take him. . . . I guess not!"

She laughed bitterly and Ann could see the baleful glow in her eyes.

"I told you that he brung me here an' put me to work, I guess. Well, that was so; he did. I'll tell you where he got me." She hitched forward. "He brung me from th' Fork. You come through there; all you know 'bout it is that there's a swell hotel there an' it's a junction point. Well, the's a lot more to know about th' Fork . . . or was."

She paused a moment and rubbed her palms together triumphantly, as if she had long anticipated this moment.

"When I was there, the' wasn't no hotel; the' wasn't

nothin' but a junction an' . . . hell itself. 'Twasn't a place with much noise about it, not so many killin's as some places maybe, but 'twas bad, low down.

"The' was a place there . . . Charley Ling's. . . . 'Twas a Chinese place, with white women. I was one of 'em."

Ann gasped slightly and drew back, and Nora laughed.

"I thought that'd hurt," she mocked. "I thought you couldn't stand it!

"Charley's was a fine place. Sheep herders come there an' Mexicans an' sometimes somebody of darker color. We wasn't particular, see? We wasn't particular, I guess not! Men was white or black or red or yellow or brown, but their money was all one color. . . .

"The' was dope an' booze an' . . . hell. . . . Charley's was a reg'lar boil on th' face of God's earth, that's what it was. . . . He — Bruce Bayard — got me out of there."

The girl breathed hard and swiftly. Her upper lip was drawn back and her white teeth gleamed in the semi-darkness as she sat forward in her chair, flushed, her accusing face thrust forward toward the bewildered, horrified Ann Lytton.

"He got me there, so you know what I was, what I am. He brung me here, got me this job, has kept me here ever since," — with a suggestion of faltering pur-

pose in her voice. "It's been him ever since; just him. I'll say that for myself. I've been on th' level with Bruce an' ain't had nothin' to do with others.

"You see he's mine!"—her voice, which had dropped to a monotone, rose bitinglly again. "He's mine; he's all I got. If 'twasn't for him, I wouldn't be here. If he quits me, I'll go back to that other. I don't want to go back; so long as he sticks by me I won't go back. If I leave, it'll be because I'm drove back. . . .

"That's what you're doin'. You're drivin' me back to Charley's . . . or some place like it. . . ."

She moved from side to side, defiantly, and leaned further forward, resting her elbows on her knees, staring out into the darkened street below them.

"You come here, a married woman; you got one man now, an' he don't suit. So you think you're goin' to take mine. That's big business for a . . . a respectable lady, like yourself, ain't it? Stealin' a man off a woman like me!"

She laughed shortly, and did not so much as look up as Ann tried to reply and could not make words frame coherent sentences.

"I've kept still until now, 'cause I ain't proud of my past, 'cause I thought you, havin' one man, had enough without meddlin' with mine. But I'm through keepin' my mouth shut now,"—menacingly. "I'm through, I tell you,"—wiping her hands along her thighs and

straightening her body slowly as she turned a malevolent gaze on the silent Ann. "You're tryin' to take what belongs to me an' I won't set by an' let you walk off with him. I'll —"

"Why, what'd this town say, if I was to tell 'em you're Ned Lytton's wife instead of his sister? They all know you've been havin' Bruce come here to your room; they all think he's your lover. First thing, they'd fire you out of th' hotel; then, they'd laugh at you as you walked along th' street! It'd ruin him, too; what with keepin' your man out at his ranch so's he can see you without trouble!"

Her voice had mounted steadily and, at the last, she rose to her feet, bending over the bewildered Ann and gesturing heavily with her right arm while the other was pressed tightly across her chest.

"That's what I come here to tell you to-night!" she cried. "That's what you know, now. But I want you to know that while I've been bad, as bad as women get, that I've been open about it; I ain't been no hypocrite; I ain't passed as a good woman an' . . . been bad —"

"Nora, stop this!"

Ann leaped to her feet and confronted the girl, for the moment furious, combative. They faced one another in the faint light that came through the windows and before her roused intensity Nora stepped backward, yielding suddenly, frightened by this show of

vigorous indignation, for she had believed that her accusation would grind the spirit, the pride, from Ann.

“ Why, you-u-u- . . . ”

Ann’s hands clenched and opened convulsively at her sides as she groped fruitlessly for words.

“ You go now, Nora ; go away from me ! What you have said has been too contemptible, too base for me even to answer ! ”

She walked quickly to the door, opened it and faced about with a gesture of command. Nora hesitated a moment, then, without a word, walked from the room. In the hall she paused, back still toward Ann as though she had more that she would say, as if, possibly, she considered the advisability of going further ; but, if that was true, she had no opportunity then, for the door closed firmly and the lock clicked.

It was the most confused moment in Ann’s life. The identification of her husband, her several trying scenes with Bayard, would not compare with it. She heard Nora’s slow, receding footsteps with infinite relief and, when they were quite gone, she realized that as she stood, back to the door, she was shaking violently. She was weakened, frightened by what had passed, and, as she strove through those minutes to control her thoughts, to marshal the elements of the ordeal through which she had come, she became possessed by the terrifying conviction that she had no defence to offer ! That she could not answer the other woman’s accusations, that by telling Nora she was above replying to

those charges she was only hiding behind a front of false superiority, a veneer of assurance that was as artificial as it was thin.

She moved to her bed with lagging, uncertain steps and sat down with a long sigh; then, drew a wrist across her eyes, propping herself erect with the other arm.

"She . . . he belongs to her . . ." she said aloud, trying to bring coherence to her thinking by the uttered words. "He belongs . . . to her. . . ."

A slow warmth went through her body, into her cheeks to make them flame fiercely. That was a sense of guilt coming over her, shaming her, torturing her, and behind it, inspiring, urging it along, giving it strength, was that conscience of hers.

At other times she had defied that older self; only that evening she had regained some of the ground from which it had driven her by its last assault, lifting herself above the judgments she had been trained to respect because, in transgressing them, she had experienced a free, holy joy that had never been hers so long as she had remained within their bounds. But now! That cry for escape was gone.

She had been stealing another woman's man . . . and such a woman!

Never before had she faced such ugly truths as the girl had poured upon her. Of the cancerous places in the social structure she had known, of course; at times she had even gone so far as to judge herself a wide-awake, keen-seeing woman, but now . . . she shud-

dered as the woman's words came back to her, "White or black or red or brown; but their money was all th' same color." That was too horrible, too revolting; she could not accept it with a detached point of view. Its very truth — she did not doubt it — smirched her, for she had been stealing the man of such a woman!

Oh, that conscience was finding its revenge! That day it had been outraged, had been all but unseated; but now it came back with a vengeance. She, the lawful wife of Ned Lytton, had plotted to win Bruce Bayard. No, she had not! one part of her protested, as she weakened and sought for any escape that meant relief. You did, you did! thundered that older self. By passively accepting, as a fact, her want of him, she had sinned. By finding joy in his touch, at sight of him, she had grievously wronged not only Ned and herself but all people. She was a contaminated thing! She was as bad, worse than Nora Brewster, because, while Nora had sinned, she admitted it, had done it openly, and frankly while she, Ann Lytton, had covered it with a cloak of hypocrisy, had refused to admit her transgressions even to herself and lied and distorted happenings, even her thoughts, until they were made to appease her craven heart!

"She said it; she said it!" Ann muttered aloud. "She said that I was a hypocrite. She said . . . she did not hide!" Then, for a moment, she was firm, drawing her body, even, to firmness to contend more effectively against these suggestive accusations. What

matter if she were married? What if Bayard did love an abandoned woman? What mattered anything but that she loved him?

And, as though it had waited for her to go that far to show her hand, that other self cried out: "To your God you have given your word to love this man, your husband! To your God you have promised to love no other! To your God you have pledged him your body, your soul, your life, come what may!"

She cowered before the thought, tearless, silent, and sat there, going through and through the same emotional experiences, always coming against the stone wall formed by her concepts of honor and morality.

In another room of the Manzanita House another woman fought with herself that night. Nora, too, stood backed against her locked door a long time after she had gained its refuge, bewildered, trying to think her way to a clear understanding of all that had happened. Its entire consequence came to her sooner than it had come to Ann. She groped along the wall to her matchsafe, scratched a light, removed the chimney from her lamp and set the wick burning. She waved out the match absently, put the charred remains in the oilcloth cover of the washstand and said to herself,

"Well, I've done it."

It was as though she spoke of the accomplishment of an end the advisability of which had been debatable in her mind, and as if there were now no remedy. What was done, was done; events of the past could not

be altered, their consequences could not be changed.

She undressed listlessly, put on her nightgown and moved to the crinkled mirror to take down her hair.

"I guess that'll fix her," she muttered. "She'll get out, now . . ."

She looked at herself in the mirror as she began to speak, but, when her sight met its own reflection, her voice faltered, the words trailed off. She stood motionless, scrutinizing herself closely, critically; then saw a slow flush come up from her neck, flooding her cheeks. Uneasily her eyes dropped from their reflection, then shot back with a rallying of the dark defiance that had been in them; only for an instant, for the fire disappeared, they became unsteady.

Her movements grew rapid. She drew hairpins from the coils and dropped them heedlessly. She shook out her hair and brushed it with nervous vigor; then braided it feverishly, as if some inner emotion might find vent in that simple task.

Time after time she shot glances into the mirror, but in each instance she felt her cheeks burn more fiercely, saw the confused humility increasing in her expression and, finally, her rapid breathing lost its regularity, her lips quivered and her shoulders lifted in a sob. She covered her face with her hands, pressing finger tips tightly against her eyes, struggling to master herself, to bring again that defiant spirit. But she could not; it had gone and she was fighting doggedly against the re-

action, knowing that it must come, knowing what it would be, almost terror stricken at the realization.

She paced the floor, stopping now and then, and finally cried aloud:

"She *was* stealin' him; he *is* mine!"—as though some presence had accused her of a lie. Again, she repeated the words, but in a whisper; and conviction was not with her.

She sat down on the edge of her bed, but could not remain quiet, and commenced walking, moving automatically, almost dreamlike, distressed, flinging her arms about like a guilt-maddened Lady Macbeth. Each time she passed the mirror she experienced a terrible desire to meet her own gaze again, but she would not, for her own eyes accused her, bored relentlessly into her heart.

"An' I called her a hypocrite," she burst out suddenly, halted, turned and rushed back toward the dresser, straining forward, forcing her gaze to read the soul that was bared before her, there in the mirror.

"You lied to her!" she muttered. "You told her dirty lies; you're throwin' him down. You're killin' her . . . You . . ."

"Oh, Bruce, Bruce!"

She turned away and let the tears come again.

"You'd hate me, Bruce, you'd hate me!"

She threw herself full length on the bed. Jealousy had had its inning. All the bitterness that it could

create had been flung forth on to the woman who had roused it and then the emotion had died. Strong as it was in Nora, the elemental, the childish, it was not so strong as her loyalty to Bayard's influence and the same thing in her that would have welcomed physical abuse from him now called on her to undo her work of the evening, to strive to prevent his love for Ann from wasting itself, though every effort that she might make toward that end would cause her suffering.

It was midnight when Ann Lytton, still motionless, still chilling and flushing as thought followed thought through her confused mind, found herself in the center of her dark room. The knock that had roused her to things outside sounded again on her door, low and cautious.

"Who is it?" she asked, unsteadily.

"It's me, Nora."

The tone was husky, weak, contrite.

"Well, what do you want, Nora?"—summoning a sternness for the query.

"I . . . I want to come in; I want to tell you something . . . if you'll let me."

Ann calculated a moment, but the quality of the other woman's voice, supplicating, uncertain, swung the balance and she unlocked the door, opening it wide. Nora stood in her long white gown, head hung, fingers nervously intertwining before her.

A pitiable humility was about the girl, and on sight of it Ann's manner changed.

"What is it, Nora? Won't you come in?"

She stepped forward, took her by the hand and gently urged her into the room, closing the door.

"Sit on the bed, Nora, while I light the lamp."

"Oh, M's. Lytton, please don't . . ."—with an uneasy movement. "I'd rather . . . not have to look at you. . . ."

A pause.

"Why, if you want it that way, of course, Nora. Sit down here. Aren't you cold?"

She took a shawl from its hook, threw it across the other's shoulders and sat down on the bed, drawing Nora to her side. An awkward silence followed, then came the sound of Nora's crying, lifted to a pitch just above a sigh.

"Don't, Nora! Please, don't! What is it, now? Tell me . . . do tell me," Ann pleaded, growing stronger, of better balance, feeling some of her genuine assurance returning.

"I . . . I lied to you. I . . ." Nora began and stopped.

Ann uttered no word; just inhaled very slowly and squared her shoulders with relief.

"I . . . was jealous of you. When I saw him with his arms around you this afternoon, I . . . couldn't stand it. I had to do somethin'. I was drove to it."

She brushed the damp hair back from her forehead and cleared her throat. She clutched Ann's one hand in both hers and turned to talk closely into her face.

"I . . . it wasn't all lies. That part about me, about Charley Ling's, was true. It was true that Bruce took me out of there, too, but not for what you think. I . . . I was pretty bad for a young girl, but I never knew much different until I knew Bruce. . . . I didn't know much.

"I was at Ling's. I didn't lie about that," she repeated stoically, baring her shame in an attempt to atone for her former behavior. "I'd been there quite a while, when one night when the' was whiskey an' men an' hell, he come. . . .

"I'll never forget it. I can't. He was so big that he filled th' door, he was so . . . different, so clean an' disgusted-like, that it stopped th' noise for a minute. He stood lookin' us over; then he saw me an' looked an' looked, an' I couldn't do nothin' but hang my head when 'twas my business to laugh at him.

"He didn't say a word at first, but he come across to to me an' set down beside me, an' when th' piano started again an' folks quit givin' us attention he said,

" 'You're only a kid.'

"Just that; but it made me cry. He was so kind of accusin' an' so gentle. Nobody'd ever been gentle with me before that I could remember of. They'd been accusin' all right, all right . . . but not gentle. He went away that night an' I cried until it was light. In th' mornin' he come back an' asked for me an' took me outdoors an' talked to me. He talked. . . . He didn't do no preachin'; he didn't say nothin' about bein'

good or bein' bad. He just said that that place wasn't fit for coyotes to live in, that I'd never see th' mountains or th' stars or th' sunshine livin' there. He said that. . . . An' he said he'd get me a job here in Yavapai. . . .

"He did. Got me this job, in this hotel. He stuck by me when folks started to talk; he stopped it. He taught me to ride an' like horses an' dogs an' th' valley an' things like that. He give me things to read an' talked to me about 'em an' . . . was good to me.

"I've always been like his sister. That's straight, M's. Lytton; that's no lie. He's been my brother; that's all. More 'n that, I'm about th' only woman he's looked at in three years until . . . you come. He ain't a saint but he's . . . an awful fine man."

She was silent a moment and stroked the hand she had taken in hers.

"That's all. That's all the' is to say. I've tried to get him, tried to make him care for me . . . a lot; but I ain't his kind,"—with a slow shake of the head as she withdrew one hand. "I can never be his kind . . . in that way. I've known it all along, but I've never let myself believe th' truth. He didn't know, didn't even guess. That's how hopeless it was. He ain't never seen that I'd do . . . anythin' for him.

"When you come, I saw th' difference in him . . . right off. He . . . You're his kind, M's. Lytton. You're what he's waited for, what he's lookin' for. I was jealous. I hated you from th' first. I was nice

to you 'cause he wanted it, 'cause that would make him happier. I fought against showin' what I felt for his sake . . . for him. Then, to-day, when I seen how he looked after he'd had you in his arms where I've wanted to be always, as I've wanted to make him look, I. . . .

"It made me kind of crazy. I felt like tellin' you what I was, lyin' about what I was to Bruce, thinkin' it might drive you away an' I might sometime make him love me. But, after I'd done it, after I got it into words, I knew it was against everything he'd ever taught me, against everything he'd ever been, an' that if you went 't would break his heart. That's why I come back to tell you I lied, to tell you how it is. . . .

"You go to him now; you go before it's too late. I tried to come between you . . . an' didn't. You go to him before somethin' does. . . ."

She felt Ann's arm go about her and stifling her sobs she yielded to the pull until her head rested on the other woman's shoulder.

"Oh, Nora, I can't tell you how this makes me feel; I can't. I'll never be able to. There's nothing I can say at all, nothing I can do, even!"

The waitress lifted her face to peer closely at her.

"Just one thing you can do," she said, lowly. "Go to him now. That's what I come back here for — to tell you I lied, so you would go."

Ann straightened and shook her head sharply.

"That's impossible," she said, emphatically. "Impossible."

"Impossible, M's. Lytton?" — wiping her eyes.

"Yes, Nora."

"But why? He loves you!"

"When you were here before you gave the reason — I'm a married woman."

"But that ain't. . . . Why, do you *love* your husband?"

She grasped Ann's arm and shook it gently as she put that question in a voice that the tears had made hoarse, and leaned forward to catch the answer. For an interval Ann did not reply, gave no sign that she had heard, and Nora repeated her query with impressive slowness.

"It isn't a question of loving, Nora," she finally said. "I'm his wife; I have a wife's duty to perform."

"But do you love him?" the girl persisted.

"No, I don't any more . . ." — sadly, yet without regret.

"An' you'd go back to him, M's. Lytton? You'd go back without lovin' him?"

Incredulity was in her tone.

"Of course. It is my place. He is coming to me soon, stronger, wiser, I hope, and there's a chance that we will find at least a little peace together."

"But the' won't be love," — in a whisper.

Ann gave a little shudder and braced her shoulders backward.

"No, Nora. That is past. Besides, I —"

"Don't be afraid to admit it!" the girl urged, speaking rapidly. "Don't be afraid to tell me. I know what you're thinkin'. You love Bruce Bayard! I know; you can't hide it from me, M's. Lytton."

Ann's fingers twisted the coverlet.

"And if I do?" she asked weakly. "What if I do?"

"What if you do? Ain't lovin' a man answer enough for any woman?" cried the other. "Is the' anything else that holds folks together? Is the' anything else that makes men an' women happy? Does your bein' a man's wife mean happiness? Your promisin' to love him didn't make you love, did it? Because a preacher told you you was one didn't make it so, did it? Nobody can make you love him, not even yourself, 'cause you said it was duty that takes you back; that you don't love him. But you can't help lovin' Bruce Bayard!

"Oh, M's. Lytton, don't fool yourself about this duty! It's up to a man an' a woman to take love, to take happiness, when it comes. You can't set still an' watch it go by an' hope to have it come again; real happiness don't happen but once in most of our lives. I know. I've been down . . . I've been happy, too . . . I know!

"An' duty! Why, ma'am, duty like you think you ought to do, is waste! You're young, you're healthy, you're pretty. You'll waste your best years, you'll

waste your health, you'll waste your looks on duty! You'll waste all your love; you'll get old an' bitter an'. . . .

"If the's anything under heaven that's a crime, it's wasted love! Oh, M's. Lytton, I wasted my love when I was a kid, 'cause I didn't know better. I sold mine for money. For God's sake, don't sell yours for duty! If the's anything your God meant folks to do was to get what joy they can out of life. He wouldn't want you to think of bein' Ned Lytton's wife as . . . as your duty. He . . . God ain't that kind, M's. Lytton; he ain't!"

"Nora, Nora, don't say these things!" Ann pleaded. "You're wrong, you must be! Don't tempt me to . . . these new ways . . . don't. . . ."

"New!" the girl broke in. "It ain't new, what I've been sayin'. It's as old as men an' women. It's as old as th' world. Th' things you try to make yourself believe are th' new ones. Love was old before folks first thought about duty. It seems new, because you ain't ever let yourself see straight . . . you never had to until now."

"Nora, stop! You must stop! You can't be right . . . you can't be!"

The waitress trembled against Ann and commenced to cry under the strain of her earnestness.

"But I know I'm right, M's. Lytton, I know I am! I know what you're doin'. Do — don't you see that you wouldn't be much different from what I was, if you

went back to your husband, hatin' him an' lovin' another? Happiness comes just once; it's a sin to let it go by!"

Slowly Ann withdrew her embrace from the girl. She sat with hands limp in her lap until Nora's sobbing had subsided to mere long-drawn breaths; then she rose and walked to the window, looking out into the moonlit night. And when Nora, drying her eyes, regaining control of her emotions, started to speak again she saw that Ann was lost in thought, that it was unnecessary to argue further, so she went quietly from the room. The rattle of the knob, the sound of the closing door did not rouse the woman she left behind. Ann only stared out at the far hills which were a murky blot in the cold light; stared with eyes that did not see, for out of the storm of that night a new creature was coming into active life within her and the re-birth was so wonderful that it quite deadened her physical senses.

CHAPTER XIV

THE WOMAN ON HORSEBACK

Lytton had gone for a ride in the hills, leaving Bayard alone at the ranch, busying himself with accomplishing many odds and ends of tasks which had been neglected in the weeks that his attention had been divided between his cattle and the troubles of Ann. Ned was back to his usual strength, now; also, his mending mental attitude had made him a better companion, a less trying patient. He rode daily, he helped somewhat with the ranch work, his sleeps were long and untroubled. The first time a horse had carried him from sight Bayard had scarcely expected to see him back again; he had firmly believed that Lytton would ride directly to Yavapai and fill himself with whiskey. When he came riding into the ranch, tired, glad to be home once more, Bruce knew that the man was not wholly unappreciative, that his earlier remonstrances at remaining at the Circle A had not always been genuine.

"Mighty white of you, old chap," he had said, after dismounting. "Mighty white of you to treat me like this. Some day I'll pay you back."

"You'll pay me back by gettin' to be good an' strong

an' goin' out an' bein' a man," the rancher had answered, and Lytton had laughed at his seriousness.

No intimation of his wife's nearness had been given to Lytton. Isolated as they were, far off the beaten path of travel, few people ever stopped at the ranch and, when stray visitors had dropped in, chance or Bayard's diplomacy had prevented their discovering the other man's presence. Not once after their argument over the rights of a man to his wife had Ned referred to 'Ann and in that Bruce found both a conscious and an unconscious comfort: the first sort because it hurt him brutally to be reminded of the girl as this man's mate, and the other because the fact that while Lytton had only bitterness for Ann Bayard could wholly justify his own attention to her, his own love.

Day after day the progress continued uninterrupted, Bruce making it a point to have his charge ride alone, unless Ned himself expressed a desire to go in company. The rancher believed that if the other were ever to be strong enough to resist the temptation to return to his old haunts and ways, now was the time. Although Lytton's attitude was, except at rare intervals, subtly resentful, his passive acceptance of the conditions under which he lived was evidence that he saw the wisdom in remaining at the ranch and those hours alone on horseback, out of sight, away from any influencing contact, were the first tests. Bayard was delighted to see that his work did not collapse the moment he removed from it his watchful support. And yet, while he took

pride in this accomplishment, he went about his daily work with a sense of depression constantly on him. It was as though some inevitable calamity impended, as though, almost, hope had been removed from his future. He tried not to allow himself to think of Ann Lytton. He knew that to let his fancies and emotions go unrestrained for an hour would rouse in his heart a hatred so intense, so compelling, that he would rise in all his strength during some of Lytton's moods and do the man violence; or, if not that, then, when talking to her, he would lose self-control and break his word to her and to himself that not again so long as she loved her husband would he speak of his regard for her.

But the end of that phase was approaching. Within a few days Lytton would know that his wife was in the country, would go to her, and Bayard's interval of protectorate over them both, which at least gave him opportunity to see the woman he loved, would come to its conclusion.

Now, as he worked on a broken hinge of the corral gate his heart was heavy and, finally, to force himself to stop brooding, he broke into song:

"From th' desert I come to thee
On a stallion shod wi —

"No . . . not that," he muttered. "I'll not be comin' . . . on a stallion shod with fire, or anythin' else." Then he began this cruder, livelier strain:

“Foot in th’ stirrup an’ hand on th’ horn,
Best damn cowboy ever was born,

“Coma ti yi youpa ya, youpa ya,
Coma ti yi —

“Dog-gone bolt ’s too short, Abe,” he muttered to the sorrel who stood within the enclosure. Too short —

“I herded an’ I hollered an’ I done very well,
Till th’ boss says, Boys, just let ’em go to hell!

“Coma ti yi —

“What do you see, Boy?”

As he turned to go toward the blacksmith shop, he saw the horse standing with head up and every line of his body rigid, gazing off on the valley.

“You see somebody?” he asked, and swung up on the corral for a better view.

Far out beyond and below him a lazy wisp of dust rose lightly to be trailed away by the breath of warm breeze, and, after his eyes had studied it a moment, he discerned a moving dot that he knew was horse and rider.

“Lytton didn’t go that way,” he muttered, as he dropped to the ground again. “No use worryin’ any more, though; it’s time somebody knew he was here; they will soon, an’ it won’t do any harm.”

He swept the valley with his gaze again and shook his head. “Seems like it’s in shadow all the time

now," he muttered, "an' not a cloud in the sky!"

When he found a bolt of proper length and fitted it in place the horse and rider were appreciably nearer and he watched them crawl toward him a moment.

"I went to th' wagon to get my roll,
To come back to Texas, dad-burn my soul;
I went to th' wagon to draw my roll,
Th' boss said I was nine dollars in th' hole!

"Coma ti yi, youpy, youpy ya, youpy ya,
Coma ti —"

He turned again to look at the approaching rider before he went into the stable. Then, for twenty minutes he was busy with hammer and saw, humming to himself, thinking of things quite other than the work at which his hands were busy.

"Is this the way you greet your visitors?"

It was Ann Lytton's voice coming from the stable doorway, and Bayard straightened slowly, turning awkwardly to look at her over his shoulder. She was flushed, flustered, uncertain for the moment just how to comport herself, but he did not notice for he was far off balance himself.

"Good-mornin', ma'am," he said, taking off his hat and stepping out from the stall in which he had been working. "What do you want here?"

His voice was pitched almost in a tone of rebuke.

"I came to see my husband," she answered, and for a moment they stared hard at one another, Bayard, as

though he did not believe her, and the woman, as if conscious that he questioned the truth of her reply. Also, as if she feared he might read in her the *whole* truth.

"He ought to be back soon," the rancher said, replacing his hat. "He's off for a ride. Won't you come into the house?"

They stepped outside. He saw that behind her saddle a bundle was tied. He looked from it to her inquiringly.

"I have thought it all over," she said, as if he had challenged her with words, "and I've made up my mind that my place, for the time, anyhow, is with Ned. It's best for me to be here; it's best for Ned to know and have it over with. . . . Have a complete understanding."

He looked away from her, failing to mark the significance of her last words or to see the fresh determination in her face.

"It had to come sometime. I expect now 's about as likely a day as any," he said, gloomily, and untied the roll from her saddle. "I'll show you around th' house so you'll know where things are,"—and started across toward the shade of the ash tree.

Ann walked beside him, wanting to speak, not knowing what to say. She found no words at all, until they gained the kitchen and stood within. Bayard placed her bundle on the table.

"Do you mean that you won't be here?" she faltered.

"Well, that's th' best way," he said, looking down and rubbing the back of a chair thoughtfully.

"I can't. . . ."

"Yes, you can,"—divining what was in her mind and interrupting. "I'll be glad to have you meet him here, ma'am. 'Twould offend me if you went away, but I think, considerin' everythin', how you've been apart so long an' all, it'd be better for me to leave you two alone. I've got business in town anyhow," he lied. "I'd have to go in either to-night or in th' mornin'. It's th' best way all round."

He did not look at her during this, could not trust himself to. He felt that to meet her gaze would mean that he would be tempted again to declare his love for her, his hatred for her husband, because this hour was another turning point for them all. For the safety of Ned Lytton to hold himself in accord with his own sense of right, it was wise for him to be away at the meeting of husband and wife; not fear for himself but of himself drove him from his hearth. He knew that Ann's eyes were on him, steady and inquiring, felt somehow that she had suddenly become mistress of the situation. Heretofore, he had dominated all their interviews. But now that eminence was gone. He was retreating from this woman and not wholly in good order, for he could not remain with her nor could he

trust himself to give a true explanation of his departure.

To delay longer, to just stand there and discuss the very embarrassing situation, would be no relief, might only lead to greater discomfiture, he knew, so he said:

"All th' things to cook with are in that cupboard, ma'am,"—turning away from her to indicate. "All th' pots an' pans an' dishes are below there, on those shelves. He . . . your husband knows, anyhow. He can show you round.

"In here. . . . This is his room."

He paused when halfway across the floor, turned and looked at her. In her eye he caught a troubled quality.

"He's been sleepin' here," he repeated, walking on and opening the door.

The woman followed and looked over his shoulder.

"But I've another room; my room, in here,"—moving to another door. "This is mine, an' as I won't be here you can use it as you . . . as you want to."

Nothing in his tone or manner of speech suggested anything but the idea contained in his words, but Ann's eyes rested on his profile with a sudden gratitude, a warmth. Surprise came to her a moment later and she exclaimed,

"Oh, how fine!"

He had thrown the door back and stood aside for her to enter. Light came into the room from three windows and before the gentle breeze white curtains billowed inward. Navajo blankets covered the floor.

The bed, in one corner, was spread a gay serape and beside it was a bookcase with shelves well filled. In the center of the room stood a table and on it a reading lamp. About the walls were pictures, few in number but interesting.

At Ann's exclamation Bruce smiled broadly, pleased.

"I'm glad you like it," he said. "I do. I thought maybe you would."

"Why, it's splendid!" she cried again. "It doesn't look like a room in the house of a bachelor rancher. It doesn't look like . . ."

She stopped and looked up at him, puzzled, questioning so eloquently with her gaze that it was unnecessary for him to await the spoken query.

"Yes, I did it myself," he said with a flushed laugh. Their self-consciousness was relieved by the change of thought. "It's mine; all mine. You . . . You're the first person to come in here, ma'am, except Tim. . . . He was my daddy, an' he's dead. I don't ask folks in here 'cause it's so much trouble to explain to most of 'em. They'd think I'm stuck up, with lace curtains an' all. . . ."

He waved his hands to include the setting.

"I can live with th' roughest of 'em an' enjoy it; I can put up with anything when it's necessary, but somehow I've always wanted something different, something that'll fill a place that plenty of grub an' a hot stove don't always satisfy.

"Them curtains,"—with a chuckle—"came from

th' Manzanita House. They were th' first decorations I put up. I woke up one mornin' after I'd been . . . well, relieving my youth a little. I was in one of th' hotel rooms. 'Twas about this time of year an' th' wind was soft an' gentle, blowin' through th' windows like it does now, an' them curtains looked so cool an' clean an' homelike that I . . . Well, I just rustled three pair, ma'am! "

He laughed again and crossed the room to free one curtain that had caught itself on a protruding hook.

"Tim an' me had a great argument, when I brought 'em home. Tim, he says that if I was goin' to have curtains, I ought to go through with th' whole deal an' have gilt rods to hang 'em on. I says, no, that was goin' too far, gettin' to be too dudish, so I nailed 'em up! "

He pointed to show her the six-penny nails that held them in place, and Ann laughed heartily.

"Then, I played a little game that th' boys out here call Monte. It's played with cards, ma'am. I played with a Navajo I know — an' cards — an' he had just one kind of luck, awful bad. That's where these blankets come from," — smiling in recollection.

All this pleased him; he saw the humor of a man of his physique, his pursuit, furnishing a room with all the pains of a girl.

"Those are good rugs. See? They're all black an' gray an' brown: natural colors. Red an' green are for tourists.

"I bought that serape from a Mexican in Sonora when I was down there lookin' around. That lamp, though, that's th' best thing I got."

He leaned low to blow the dust from its green shade with great pains, and Ann laughed outright at him.

"I never could learn to dust proper, ma'am. It don't bother me so long's I don't see it," he confessed. "A man who came out here to stay with us for his health — a teacher — brought that lamp; when he went back, he left it for me. I think a lot of it."

"You read by it?" she asked.

"Lord, yes! Those," — waving his hand toward the books, and she walked across to inspect them, Bayard moving beside her. "He left 'em for me. He keeps sendin' me more every fall. I . . . I learnt all I know out of them, an' from what he told me. It ain't much — what I know. But I got it all myself; that makes it seem more."

Ann's throat tightened at that, but she only leaned lower over the shelves. Dickens was there, and Thackeray; one or two of Scott and a broken set of Dumas. History and travel predominated, with a volume of Kipling verse and a book on mythology discovered in a cursory inspection.

"I think a lot of my books. I like 'em all. . . . I liked that story 'bout Oliver Twist th' best of 'em," he said, pointing to the Dickens. "Poor kid! An' old Bill Sykes! Lord, he was a hellion — a bad one, ma'am," — correcting himself hastily. "An' Miss

Sharpe this man Thackeray wrote about in his book! I'd like to know a woman like her; she sure was a slick one, wasn't she? She'd done well in th' cow business."

"Do you like these?" she asked, indicating the Scott.

"Well, sometimes," he said. "I like th' history in 'em, but, unless I got a lot of time, like winter, I don't read 'em much. I like 'Ivanhoe' pretty well any time, but in most of 'em Walt sure rounded up a lot of words!"

She smiled at that.

"This is th' best of 'em all, though," he said, drawing out Carlyle's French Revolution. "It took me all one winter to get on to th' hang of that book, but I stayed by her an' . . . well, I'd rather read it now than anythin'. Funny that a man writin' so long ago could say so many things that keep right on makin' good.

"I'd like to know him," he said a moment later. "I could think up a lot of questions to ask a man like that."

He stood running over the worn, soiled pages of his "French Revolution" lost in thought and Ann, stooping before the shelves, turned her face to watch him covertly. This was the explanation of the Bruce Bayard she knew and loved; she now understood. This was why he had drawn her to him so easily. He was rough of manner, of speech, but behind it all was

thought, intelligence; not that alone, but the intelligence of an intrinsically fine mind. For an unschooled man to accomplish what he had accomplished was beyond her experience.

"I liked them," he said, touching some volumes of Owen Wister. "Lord, he sure knows cowboys an' such. He wrote a story about 'n *hombre* called Jones, Specimen Jones, that makes me sore from laughin' every time I read it. It's about Arizona an' naturally hits me.

"That's why I like that picture. It's my country, too." He pointed to a print of Remington's "Fight for The Water Hole."

"That's th' way it looks — heat an' color an' distance," he said. "But when a thing's painted like that, you get more 'n th' looks. You get taste an' smell an' th' feeling. I get thirsty an' hot an' desperate every time I look at that picture very long. . . .

"This Cousin Jack, Kipling," he resumed, turning back to the books, "he wrote a poem about what a man ought to be before he considers himself a man that says all there is to say on th' subject. Nothin' new in what he wrote, but he's corraled all th' ideas anybody's ever thought about. It's fine —"

"But who is that?" she broke in, walking closer to the photograph of a young woman, too eager to see the whole of this room to pause long over any one thing.

He smiled in embarrassment.

“ My sister, ma’am.”

“ Your sister ! ”

“ Yeah. You see, I never had any folks. Nearest thing to ancestors I know about was a lot of bent steel an’ burnin’ railroad cars. Old Tim picked me out of a wreck when I was a baby, an’ we never found out nothin’ about me.” He rubbed the back of one hand on his hip. “ I . . . It ain’t nice, knowin’ you don’t belong to nobody, so I picked out my family,”— smiling again.

“ I was in Phoenix once an’ I saw that lady’s picture in front of a photograph gallery. It was early mornin’ an’ I was on my way to th’ train comin’ north. I busted th’ glass of th’ show case an’ took it. I left a five-dollar gold piece there so th’ photographer wouldn’t mind, an’ I guess th’ lady, if she knew, wouldn’t care so awful much. Nobody ever seen her here but Tim an’ me. I respect her a lot, like I would my sister. You expect she would mind, ma’am ? ”

“ I think she would be very much pleased,” Ann said, soberly.

“ An’ that up there’s my mother,” he said, after their gazes had clung a moment.

“ Whistler’s ‘ Mother ’ ! ”

“ Yes, he painted it; but she’s th’ one I’d like to have for my mother, if I could picked her out. She looks like a good mother, don’t she? I thought so when I got that . . . with a San Francisco newspaper.”

Ann did not trust herself to speak or to look at him.

"Your father?" she asked after a moment.

"Oh, I had one. Tim. He was my daddy. He did all any father could for me. No, ma'am, I wouldn't pick out nobody to take Tim's place. He brought me up. But if I was to have uncles, I'd like them."

He moved across th' room to where prints of Lincoln and Lee were tacked to the wall.

"But, they were enemies!" Ann objected.

"Sure, I know it. But they both thought somethin' an' stuck by it an' fought it out. Lincoln believed one way, Lee another; they both stood by their principles an' that's all that counts. Out here we have cattlemen an' sheepmen. I'm in cattle an' lots of times I've felt like gunnin' for th' fellers who were tryin' to sheep me, but then I'd stop an' think that maybe there was somethin' to be said on their side.

"I'd sure liked to have men for uncles who could believe in a thing as hard as they believed!"

A pause followed and he looked about the room again calculatingly; then started as though he had forgotten something.

"But what I brought you in here for was to tell you that this is yours, to do what you want with . . . you . . ."

His words brought them back to the situation they confronted and an embarrassed silence followed.

"I don't feel right, driving you out like this," Ann protested, at length.

"But don't you understand? Nobody's ever been in here, but Tim, who's dead, an' you. You're th' first person I've ever asked to stay in here. I'd like it . . . to think you'd been in here . . . stayin'. . . . It's you who 're doin' th' favor. . . ."

He ended in a lowered tone and was so intent, so keen in his desire that Ann looked on him with a queer little feeling of misgiving. Every now and then she had encountered those phases of him for which she could not account, which made her doubt and, for the instant, fear him. But, after she had searched his face and found there nothing but the sincere concern for her welfare, she knew that his motive was of the highest, that he thought only of her, and she answered,

"Why, I'll be glad to stay here, in your room."

He turned and walked into the kitchen, swinging one hand.

"I'll be driftin'," he said, when she followed, forcing himself to a brusque manner which disarmed her.

"You ask Ned to water th' horses. I'm ridin' th' pinto to town. I'll be back to-morrow sometime."

He put on his hat and started for the door resolutely. Then halted.

"If anything should happen," he began, attempting a casual tone. But he could not remain casual, nor could he finish his sentence. He stammered and

flushed and his gaze dropped. .“ Nothin’ will . . . to you,” he finished.

With that he was gone, leading her borrowed horse back to town at her request. From a point half a mile distant he looked back. She was still in the doorway and when he halted his pony he saw a flicker of white as she waved a handkerchief at him. He lifted his hat in salute; then rode on, with a heart that was heavy and cold.

“ Th’ finest woman that God ever gave a body,” he said, “ an’ I’ve given her over to th’ only man that walks th’ earth who wouldn’t try to appreciate her ! ”

CHAPTER XV

HER LORD AND MASTER

Ann watched him go, an apprehensive mood coming upon her. He shacked off on the pinto horse while Abe, left alone in the corral, trotted about and nickered and pawed to show his displeasure at being left behind. For a long time the girl stood there, not moving, breathing slowly; then she looked about her, turned and walked into Bruce's room, roamed around, examining the books, the pictures, the furniture, touching things with her finger tips gently, lovingly, hearing his voice again as it told her of them. For her each article in that room now held a particular interest. She stared at the photograph of the girl he had selected as a sister, at Whistler's fine, capped old lady, opened the "French Revolution" and riffled the leaves he had thumbed and soiled and torn, and laughed deep in her throat as she saw the curtains hanging irregularly from their six-penny nails . . . laughed, though her eyes were damp.

A step sounded in the kitchen and the woman became rigid as she listened.

". . . hotter . . ."

Just the one word of the muttered sentence was dis-

tinguishable, but she knew it was not Bayard's voice; knew, then, whose it must be.

Very quietly she walked to the doorway of the bedroom and stood there. Ned Lytton had halted a step from the kitchen entry and was wiping his face with a black silk kerchief. He completed the operation, removed his hat, tossed it to a chair, unbuttoned the neck of his shirt . . . and ceased all movements.

For each the wordless, soundless period that followed seemed to be an age. The woman looked at the man with a slight feeling of giddiness, a sensation that was at once relief and horror, for he was as her worst fears would have it; his face, in spite of his weeks of good living, was the color of suet, purple sacks under the eyes, lips hard and cruel, and from chin to brow were the indelible marks of wasting, of debauchery.

"Ann!" he exclaimed.

Surprise, dread, a mingling of many emotions was in the tone, and he waited at high tension for her to answer. His wife, a woman he had not seen in three years, standing there before him in the garb of this new country, beautiful, desirable, come as though from thin air! He thought this might be merely an hallucination, that it might be some uncanny creation of his unstable mind.

"Yes, Ned; it is I," she answered, with a catch in her voice.

On her words he stepped quickly forward, fear gone, eagerness about him. He took her hands in his,

fondling them nervously, and had she not swayed back from him to the slightest noticeable degree, he would have followed out his prompting to take her lips with as much matter-of-factness as he had clutched her hands.

"Ann, where did you come from?" he cried. "Why, I thought maybe you were a . . . a ghost or something! Oh, I'm glad to see you!"

"Are you, Ned?"—almost plaintively, stroking the back of one of his hands as she looked into his lighted eyes, reading sadly the desire behind that shallow joy at sight of her. "Are you really glad?"

"Of course I'm glad! Who wouldn't be? Gad, Ann, you're in fine shape!"—stepping back from her, still holding her hands, and looking her up and down, greedily. "Oh, you're good to look at!"

He went close to her again and reached out one arm quickly to slip it about her waist, but she turned away from him quite casually and he stopped, disconcerted, hurt, humiliated, but covering the fact as well as he could.

An awkward fraction of a minute followed, which he broke by asking:

"But where did you come from, Ann? How did you get here? How did you know? What brought you?"

She smiled wanly.

"One at a time, Ned. You brought me. You

should know that. I came out here to find you, to see what was happening, to help you if I could."

She allowed him to take her hands again and looked wistfully into his face as she talked. A change came into his expression with her words and his gaze shifted from hers while a show of petulance appeared in his slightly drawn brows.

"Well, I've needed help in one way," he muttered.

"You've been very ill, I know."

"You know?"—in surprise.

"Yes; I have been here through it all."

He dropped her hand and tilted his head incredulously.

"Through it all! What do you mean?"

"I've been here for a month."

"A month! You've been here a month and this is the first time you've come to see me?"

"I didn't think it best to come before."

"You've been here while I've been passing through hell itself? You've known about me, known how I've suffered? Have you?"

"Oh, Ned, I have. . . ."

"And you didn't come to me when I needed help most! You've not even taken the trouble to find out about me —"

"You're wrong there," Ann broke in simply. With the return of his old, petulant, irritating manner, the wistfulness slipped from her and a little show of inde-

pendence, of resentment, came over the woman. "I have known about you; I've kept track of you; I've waited and prayed for the time when it would be best for me to see you. . . ."

He folded his arms theatrically and swung one leg over the corner of the table. Ann stopped talking on that, for his attitude was one of open challenge.

"You've come out here to spy on me! Isn't that it? You've come to help me, you said, and yet you wouldn't even let me know you were here? Isn't it the same old game? Isn't it?"

She did not answer.

"Isn't it a fact that you've been waiting to see what I'd do when I got well? I suppose you've come out here to-day with a prayer-book and a lot of soft words, a lot of cant, to try to reform me?" He thrust his face close to hers as he asked the last.

"Is this the way you're going to greet me?" she asked. "Haven't you anything but the same old suspicion, the same old denunciation for me?"

He looked away from her and shrugged his shoulders.

"How have you known about me when you haven't been to see me?" he asked, evasively.

"Mr. Bayard has kept me informed."

He looked at her through a moment of silence, and she looked back as steadily, as intently as he.

"Bayard?" he asked. "Bayard? He's been telling you . . . about me?"

"He's been as kind to me as he has to you, Ned,"—with a feeling of misgiving even as she uttered the words. "He has . . . ridden to Yavapai many times just to tell me about you."

He looked at her again, and she saw the puzzlement in his face. He started as though to speak, checked himself and looked past her into Bayard's room.

"Where is he now?"

"He's gone to town; he left a few moments after I came. He asked me to —"

"Did he show you into that room?"

"Yes,"—turning to look. "He told me to use it."

Her husband eyed her calculatingly and rested his weight on the table once more. It was as though he had settled some important question for himself.

"Why haven't you been out before, Ann?" he asked her, eyes holding on her face to detect its slightest change of expression.

She felt herself flushing at that; her conscience again!

"You were in an awful condition, Ned," she forced herself to say. "I saw you in Yavapai, the night I arrived. I—I helped Mr. Bayard fix your arm; I knew how ill you would be when you came to yourself. We agreed—Mr. Bayard and I—that it would needlessly excite you, if I were to come here, so I stayed away. I stayed as long as I could,"—with deadly honesty—"I had to come to-day."

"You and Bayard. . . . You both thought it best

for me to stay here without knowing my wife was in Arizona? ”

His attitude had become that of a cross-examiner.

“ Yes, Ned. You were in fearful shape. You know that for days after you — ”

“ And you’ve relied on him to give you news of me? ”

He stood erect and moved nearer, watching her face closely as her eyes became less certain, her cheeks a deeper color.

“ Yes, Ned. Don’t get worked up. It’s been all right. I’m sure the weeks you put in here have given. . . . ”

“ Given what? ” he broke in, brows gathering, thrusting out his chin, glaring at her and drawing back his lips to bare the gap left by the broken and missing teeth.

The woman recoiled.

“ Give what? ” he demanded again, trembling from knee to fingers. “ To give him a chance to come and see you, that’s what you’ve given! ”

“ Ned Ly — ” — crouching, a hand to one cheek, Ann backed into Bayard’s room quickly as her husband, fists clenched and raised, lurched toward her.

“ Don’t talk to me! ” he cried thickly, face dark, voice unnatural. “ Don’t talk to me, ” — looking not at her eyes but at her heaving breast. “ I know. I know now what I should have known weeks ago! I know now why he’s been shaving his pretty face every

day, why he's been dolling up every time he left for town, putting on his gay scarfs, changing his shirts like a gentleman, instead of a dirty hound that would steal a man's wife as soon as he would steal a neighbor's calf! I know why he's held me here and lied to me and played the hypocrite,"—words running together under the intensity of his raving.

"I see it now! I see why he's admitted that there was a woman bothering him. I see why he's tried to ring in that hotel waitress to make me think she was the one he went to see. I see it all; I see what a fool I've been, what a lying pup Bayard is with all his smug talk about helping me! Helping me . . . when he's been helping himself to my wife!"

"Ned!"

"A month, eh?" he went on. "You've been here a month, have you? And he's known it; he's kept me here, by God, through fear, that's all. I confess it to you! I'd have been gone long ago but I was afraid of him! He's intimidated me on the pretext of doing it for my own good while he could steal my wife . . . my wife . . . you-u-u. . . ."

He advanced slowly, reasonless eyes on hers now, and Ann backed swiftly, putting the table between them, watching him with fear stamped on her features.

"Ugh! The snake! The poison, lying, groveling—"

"Ned!"

The sharpness of her cry, the way she straightened

and stamped her foot and vibrated with indignation broke through his rage, even, and he stopped.

"You don't know what you're saying." Her voice quivered. "You're accusing the best man friend you've ever had; you're cursing one of the best men that ever walked ground, and you're doing it without reason!"

"Without reason, am I?" he parried, quieter, breathing hard, but controlling his voice. "It's without reason when he lives with me a month, seeing my wife day after day, knowing I've not seen her in years and then never breathing a word about it? It's without reason when he opens this room to you . . . a room he's never let me look into, and tells you to use it? It's no reason when he runs away to town rather than face me here in your presence? Can you argue against that?"

"And it's without reason when you stand there flushed to your hair, you guilty woman?"

He thumped the table with his fist. "You guilty woman," he repeated, just above a whisper. "You guilty — My wife, conspiring with your lover while he keeps me here by force, by brute force. Can you argue against that . . . against that?"

It was the great moment of Ann Lytton's life. It seemed as though the inner conflict was causing congestion in her chest, stilling her heart, clogging her breathing, making her blind and powerless to move or speak

or think. It was the last struggle against her old manner of thought, against the old Ann, the strangling for once and for all that narrow conscience, the wiping out of that false conception of morality, for she emerged from her moment of doubt, of torment, a beautiful, brave creature. Her great sacrifice had been offered; it had been repulsed with contempt and now she stood free, ready to fight for her spiritual honor, her self-respect, in the face of a world's disapproval, if that should become necessary.

"Yes, I can argue against that," she cried, closing her eyes and smiling in fine confidence. "I can, Ned Lytton. I can, because he *is* my lover, because the love he bears for me is pure, is good, is true holiness!"

She leaned toward him across the table, still smiling and letting her voice drop to its normal tone, yet losing none of its triumphant resonance.

"And you can say that," he jeered, "after he's been . . . after you've been letting him keep you a month!"

"Oh, you can't hurt me with your insults, Ned, for they won't go home. You know that statement isn't true; you know me too well for that. I'm your wife by law, Ned, but beyond that I'm as free as I was five years ago, before I ever saw you. Emancipating myself wasn't easy. I came out here hampered by tradition and terms and prejudice, but I've learned the truth from this country, these people, from . . . you. I've learned that without love, without sympathy, without

understanding or the effort, the desire, to understand, no marriage is a marriage; that without them it is only ugly, hideous.

"I've had to fight it all out and think it all out for myself. Circumstances and people have helped me make my decision. I owed you something, I still thought, and I came here to-day to fulfill my duty, to give you another chance. If you had met me with even friendliness, I'd have shut my eyes, my ears, my heart to Bruce Bayard in spite of all he means to me. I'd have gone with you, thinking that I might take up the work of regeneration where he left off and give my life to making a man of you, foregoing anything greater, better for myself, in the hope that some day, some time you and I might approach halfway to happiness.

"But what did you do; what did I find? In the first moments hate of me came into your face; you jeered at me for coming, mocked me. That's what happened. Then you suspect me, suspect Bayard, who has kept you alive, who has given you another chance at everything . . . including me."

"Suspect him? Of course I suspect him! You've admitted your guilt, you damned —"

"Don't go on that way, Ned. It's only a waste of time. I told you what would have happened, if you had greeted me in another way. You've had your chance . . . you've had your thousand chances in these last five years. It's all over now. It's over between us, Ned. It's been a bitter, dreary failure and the

sooner we end it all, the better. Don't think I'm going to transgress what you call morality," she pleaded, smiling weakly. "You deserted me, Ned, after you'd abused me. You've refused to support me, you've been unfaithful in every way. I don't think the law that made me your wife will refuse to release me now —"

"You're forgetting something," he broke in, rallying his assurance with an effort. "You're forgetting that while you were conspiring to keep me here, your lover, Bruce Bayard,"—drawling the words—"was meeting you secretly. What do you think your law will say to that?"

"I'll trust to it, Ned," she answered, in splendid composure. "I will trust to other men to judge between us —"

"Then, I won't!" he screamed, stepping quickly around the table, grasping for her arm. She retreated quickly and he lunged for her again and again missed.

Then, with a choking oath, he threw the table aside and the lamp went crashing to the floor.

"Then, I won't, damn you! You're my wife, to do as I please with; the law gave you to me, and it hasn't taken you from me yet!"

He advanced menacingly toward her as she backed into a corner, paling with actual fear now; his elbows stuck stiffly out from his sides, his hands were clenched at his hips, face thrust forward, feet carrying him to her with slow uncertainty.

"Ned —" Her voice quavered. "Ned, what are you going to do?"

"Maybe I'll . . . strangle you!" he said.

She looked quickly from side to side and one hand clutched at her breast convulsively, clutched the cloth . . . and something that was resting within her waist. She started and with a quick movement unbuttoned the garment at her bosom, reached in and drew out an automatic pistol.

"Ned, don't force me!" she said, slowly, voice unsteady.

The man halted, hesitated, backed away, both hands half raised.

"Ann, you wouldn't shoot me!" he whispered.

"You said . . . you'd strangle me, Ned,"—leaning against the wall for support, because weakness had swept over her.

Lytton drew a hand across his eyes. He trembled visibly.

"But . . . I was mad, Ann," he stammered. "I was crazy; I wouldn't. . . ."

Her hands dropped to her sides and she turned her face from him, shutting her eyes and frowning at the helplessness that came over her with the excitement and the fear of a physical encounter. She could brave any moral clash, but her body was a woman's body, her strength a woman's strength, and now, when she faced disaster, her muscles failed her.

Ned comprehended. He stepped quickly to her

side, reached to the hand that held the weapon, fastened on it and with a wrench, jerked it free from her limp grasp.

"You would, would you?" he muttered, his old malevolence returning with assurance that the woman could no longer defend herself. "This! Where did you get it?"—surveying the weapon.

"It's Bayard's."

"He gave it to you to use on me?"—with a short laugh.

The woman shook her head wearily.

"You refuse to understand anything," she responded. "He gave it to me to protect you from himself."

He stood looking at her, revolving that assertion quickly in his mind, feeling for the first time that his command over the situation was good only so long as they were alone. Before his suddenly rising fear of Bruce Bayard his bitterness retreated.

"Well, we'll quit this place," he said with a swagger. "We'll clear out, you and I. . . . I've had enough of this damned treachery; trying to steal you, my wife. I might have known. I told him his foot would slip!"

Ann scarcely heard. She was possessed by a queer lethargy. She wanted to rest, to be quiet, to be left alone, yet she knew that much remained to be endured. She had never rebelled before; she had always compromised and she felt that after her great demonstra-

tion of self-sufficiency nothing could matter a great deal. Ned had said that they would quit this place. She had no idea of resisting, of even arguing. It was easier to go, to delay a further break, for their journey would not be far, she felt, nor would she be with her husband long. Bayard would come somehow; he had come when she was in danger before, and now that which menaced her was of much less consequence. Why fear?

She stooped to pick up a book that had been thrown to the floor when the table overturned.

"Leave that alone!" he ordered.

She straightened mechanically, the listlessness that was upon her making it far easier to obey than to summon the show of strength necessary to resist.

"We'll quit this place," Ned repeated again. "And you'll go with me . . ."

He turned to face the doorway. The bent reading lamp lay at his feet, shade and chimney wrecked, oil gurgling from it. He kicked the thing viciously, sending it crashing against the wall.

"The damned snake!" he muttered. "He brought you in here, did he? Into this place. . . . Bah!"

He seized a volume from the bookcase and flung it at the ruined lamp.

"Ned, don't!" she pleaded.

"You keep quiet; you'll have enough to think about coming with me. Come on, now!"

Mechanically she responded and with unreal, heavy movements put on her hat as he told her to do, crossed the kitchen floor and emerged into the afternoon sunlight. Her husband's horse, still saddled, stood in the shade of the ash tree.

"He's left only that damn stallion," she heard Ned say. "Well, we'll take him."

"What for, Ned?" she asked dully, walking after him as he strode toward the corral and catching his sleeve, shaking it for his attention. "Why are you taking him?"

"To take you away on," he snapped.

"That's stealing."

"He didn't think of that when he tried to steal my wife; I'll steal two of his horses for a while . . . just like he had you . . . for a while."

Her strength of wit had been spent in the furious scene within the house and she attempted no answer, just stood outside while Lytton entered the corral, bridled the curious stallion and turned to lead him out. Abe would not move. He would not even turn about and the man's strength was not sufficient to do more than pull his head around.

"Come along, you ———"

He took off his hat and swung it to strike the horse's nose sharply, but Abe only threw up his head and blinked rapidly. The ears were flat and he switched his tail when Lytton again tried to drag him out. He would not respond; just braced backward and resisted.

Ann forced her mind to function with some degree of alertness.

"Let me take him, Ned," she said, white faced and quiet. "I can't see you abuse him."

She took the reins from her husband who relinquished his grip on them reluctantly; then she spoke a low word to the sorrel. He sniffed her garments and moved his nostrils in silent token of recognition. This was the woman Bayard had put on his back, the only person besides his master who had ever straddled him, so it must be all right. He turned and followed her from the corral while Lytton swore under his breath.

Ten minutes later, the woman mounted on the stallion, they rode through the gate. Ann was silent, scarcely comprehending what happened.

They did not turn to the left and take the road toward Yavapai; instead, Ned followed a course that held straight eastward, gradually taking them away from the wagon tracks, out into the great expanse of valley.

"Where are you taking me, Ned?" Ann finally rallied her wits enough to ask.

"Back to my castle!" he mocked. "Back to the mine, where nobody'll come to get you!"

On that, Bayard's unexplained warning occurred to the girl and she felt her heart leap.

"Not that!" she said, dully. "Oh, Ned, not that. Something awful . . . will happen if you go back there."

He looked at her, suspecting that this was a ruse.

"What makes you think that?"

"I was warned never to let you go back there."

"Did Bayard warn you?"—leaning low in his saddle that he might see her face better. She answered with a nod. "And why didn't he want me to go back there?"

"I don't know, Ned. But — Take my word, I beg of you!"

He rose in his stirrups and shook his fist at her.

"He steals my wife and tries to frighten me away from my property, does he? What's his interest in the Sunset mine? Do you know? No? Well, we'll find out by to-morrow night, damn him!"

He slapped his coat pocket where the automatic rested and lifted his quirt to cut the hindquarters of the slow moving stallion.

It was late night when they halted at a ranch, and the house was in darkness.

"We'll put up here," Ned growled. "We'll make on before daylight . . . if we can get this damned horse to move!"

He drew back a fist as though he would strike the stallion, for the sorrel had retarded them, insisting on turning and trying to start back toward the Circle A ranch, refusing to increase his pace beyond a crawling walk, held to that only by Ann's coaxing, for she knew that if she gave the animal his head and let him turn

back, her husband would be angered to a point where he might abuse the beast.

She feared no special thing now. She wanted to reach some destination, some place where she could rest and think. This being led away seemed as only some process of transition; it was unpleasant, but great happiness was not far off. Of that she was certain.

But she could not let Ned go on to his mine. Danger of some sort waited there and it was impossible for her to allow him to walk into it. She had planned while they rode that afternoon just how she would make the first move to prevent his reaching the Sunset and as her husband hammered on the door of the house to rouse the occupants she drew a pin from her hat, shoved herself back in the saddle, and, while he was parleying with the roused rancher, scratched swiftly and nervously on the smooth leather.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MESSAGE ON THE SADDLE

The hours he spent in Yavapai that night were memorable ones for Bruce Bayard. He rode the distance to town at a slow walk and arrived after the sun had set. He had no appetite for food but, nevertheless, after washing in the kitchen, he went into the hotel dining room and talked absently to Nora.

It did not occur to him to mention what had happened that afternoon to the girl. That had been a matter too purely personal to permit its discussion with another. While he talked to her, his mind was wholly occupied with thoughts other than those of which he spoke and he did not see that the waitress was studying him carefully, reading what was written on his face. Nora knew that Ann was gone; she knew that she had taken with her a new conviction, a new courage, and the fact that Bayard had left her at his ranch, probably with Ned Lytton, puzzled the girl.

Bruce was not certain that he had acted wisely. Many circumstances might arise in which his presence at the ranch could be a determining factor. At times he wondered vaguely if Lytton might not attempt to do his wife violence, but always he comforted him-

self by assurance of her strength of character, of her moral fiber, contrasting it with Ned's vacillating nature.

"She'd take care of herself anywhere," he thought time after time.

When he had gone through with the formal routine of feeding himself he went out to stroll about. He watched the train arrive and depart, he talked absently with an Indian he knew and jested with the red man's squaw. He bought a Los Angeles paper and could not center his mind on a line of its printed pages. He walked aimlessly, finally entering the saloon where a dozen were congregated.

"That piano of yours has got powerful lungs, ain't it?" he asked the bartender, wincing, as the mechanical instrument banged out its measure.

"This here beer's so hot it tastes like medicine," he complained, putting down his glass after his first swallow, and picking up the bottle to look at it with a wry face.

"It's right off th' ice," the other assured.

"You can have th' rest of it for th' deservin' poor," he said and strode out, while the others laughed after him.

Up and down the street, into the general store to exchange absent-minded pleasantries with the proprietor's wife, across to the hotel where he tried to sit quietly in a chair, back to the saloon; up and down, up and down.

A hundred yards from the Manzanita House was a corral and in it a score of young horses were being held

to await shipment. In the course of his ambling, Bruce came to this bunch of animals and leaned against the bars, poking a hand through and snapping his thumb encouragingly as the ponies crowded against the far side and eyed him with suspicion. He talked to them a time, then climbed the fence and perched on the top pole, snapping his fingers and making coaxing sounds in futile effort to tempt the horses to come to him; and all the time his mind was back at the Circle A, wondering what had transpired under his roof, in his room, that day.

Nora's voice startled him when it sounded so close behind, for he had not heard her approach.

"Why, you scart me bad!" he said, with a laugh, letting himself down beside her. "What you doin' out to-night?"

He pinched her cheek with his old familiarity, but under the duress of his own thinking did not notice that she failed to respond in any way to his pretended mood.

"I thought I'd like to walk a little an' get th' air," she said. "An' . . . tell you that I'm goin' away."

"Away, Nora?"

"Yes, I'm goin' to Prescott, Bruce."

He lifted his hat and scratched his ear and moved beside her as she started walking along the road, now a dim tape under the mountain stars.

"Why, Nora, I thought you was a fixture here; what'll we do without you?"

He did not know how that hurt her, how the thought

that he *could* do without her hung about her heart like a sodden weight. She covered it well, holding her voice steady, restraining the discouragement that wanted to break into words, and the night kept secret with her the pallor of her face.

"I guess you'll get along, Bruce; you done it before I come an' I guess th' town'll keep on prosperin' after I leave. I . . . I got a chance to go into business."

"Why, that's fine, Sister."

"A lunch counter that I can get for two hundred; I've saved more 'n that since . . . since I come here. That'll be better than workin' for somebody else an' I figure I'll make as much and maybe considerable more."

"That's fine!" he repeated. "Fine, Nora!"

In spite of the complexity of his thinking he found an interval of respite and was truly glad for her.

"I . . . I wanted to tell you before anybody else knew, 'cause I . . . Well, you made it possible. If you hadn't done this for me . . . this here in Yavapai . . . I'd never been . . ."

He laughed at her.

"Oh, yes you would, Nora. You had it in you. If I hadn't happened along some one else would. What we're goin' to be, we're goin' to be, I figure. I was only a lucky chance."

"Lucky," she repeated. "Lucky! God, Bruce, lucky for me!"

"Naw, lucky for me, Nora. Why, don't you know that every man likes to have some woman dependin' "

on him? It's in us to want some female woman lookin' to us for protection an' help. It tickled me to death to think I was helpin' you, when, all the time, I knew down in my heart, I was only an accident."

"You can say that, Bruce, but you can't make me believe it."

They walked far, talking of the past, of her future, but not once did the conversation touch on Ann Lytton. Bayard kept away from it because of that privacy with which he had come to look on the affair, and the girl knew that his presence there in town after Ann's departure for the ranch could mean only that a crisis had been reached. With her woman's heart, her intuition, she was confident of what the outcome would be. And though she had given her all to help bring it about, she knew that the sound of it in speech would precipitate that self-revelation which she had avoided so long, at such cost.

"I'll see you again," she said, when they stood before the hotel and she was ready to enter for the night. "I'll see you again before I go, Bruce. And — I . . . thank you . . . thank you. . . ."

She gripped his hand convulsively and lowered her head; then turned and ran quickly up the steps, for she would not let him see the emotion, nor let him hear uncertain words form on her lips.

In her last speech with him, Nora had lied; she had lied because she knew that to tell him she had packed her trunk and would leave on the morning train would

bring thanks from him for what she had done for Ann Lytton; and Nora could not have stood this. From the man downstairs she had learned kindness, had learned that not all mistakes are sins, had learned that there is a judgment above that which denounces or commends by rule of thumb. He had set in her heart a desire to be possessed by him, had fed it unconsciously, had led her on and on to dream and plan; then, had unwittingly wrecked it. But he had made her too big, too fine, too gentle, to let jealousy control her for long. She had weakened just once, and that had served to set in Nora's heart a new resolve, a finer purpose than had ever found a place there before. And, as she stumbled up the narrow stairway, the tears scalding her cheeks, her soul was glad, was light, was happy, for she knew true greatness.

Bayard roamed until after midnight; then went to his room in the hotel and slept brokenly until dawn. In those hours he chilled with fear and experienced flushes of temper, but behind it all he was resigned, willing to wait. He had done his all, he had held himself strictly within the bounds of justice as he conceived it, and beyond that he could do no more.

The east had only commenced to silver when he rode out of town at a brisk gallop. He did not realize what going back to his ranch meant until he was actually on his way and then with every length of the road traveled, his apprehensions rose. It was no business of his he argued, what had transpired the day before; it was

Ann's affair . . . and her husband's. Yet, if he had left her alone, unprotected, and Lytton had done her harm, he knew that he could never escape reproaching himself, and his suffering would be in proportion to hers. Then, of the many, there was another disturbing possibility. Perhaps a complete reconciliation had followed. Perhaps he would ride into his dooryard to find Ann Lytton cooking breakfast for her husband, smiling and happy, refusing to meet his gaze, ashamed of what had been between them.

He prodded his pony to greater speed with that thought.

The sun was not yet up when he pulled his swift-breathing horse to a stop. The outer gate stood open, and, as he rode through, his face clouded slightly with annoyance over the unusual occurrence, but when he looked to the horse corral and saw that it, too, was open, and empty, that Abe was gone, his annoyance became fear. He spurred the tired pony across the yard and flung off before the house with eyes on that portion of the kitchen which was visible through the door. Then, stopped, stood still, and listened.

Not a sound except the breathing of his horse. The breeze had not yet come up, no animal life was moving. An uncanny sense of desertion was upon the place and for a moment Bayard knew real panic. What if some violence. . . .

"Lytton!" he called, cutting his half-formed, horrible thought short, and stepped into the room.

No answer greeted him and, after listening a moment, he again shouted. Then walked swiftly to the room where Ned Lytton had lived through those weeks. He knocked, waited, flung open the door and grunted at the emptiness which he found. One more room remained to be inspected — his room — and he turned to the door which was almost closed. He rapped lightly on the casing; louder, called for Lytton, grasped the knob and entered.

The overturned table, broken lamp, the spreading stain of its oil, the rumpled rugs yielded their mute suggestion, and he moved slowly about, eyeing them, searching for other evidence, searching for something more than the fact that a struggle had taken place, hoping to find it, fearing to know.

He stopped suddenly, holding his head to one side as though listening to catch a distant sound.

"Both saddle horses gone . . . they're gone," he muttered to himself and started from the room on a run.

He inspected the saddle rack under his wagonshed and saw that the third saddle was missing, and then, with expert eyes, studied the ground for evidence.

A trail, barely discernible in the multitude of hoof-marks, led through to the outer gate, crossed the road and struck straight east across the valley.

"That's Abe," he said excitedly to himself. "That was made late yesterday."

He stood erect and looked into the far reaches of

the lower valley where the wreaths of mists in the hollows were turning to silver and those without shelter becoming dispelled as the sun spread its first warmth over the country.

"You've stolen my horse!" he said aloud, and evenly, as though he were dispassionately charging some one before him with the misdeed. "You stole my horse, but she . . . was your woman!"

He straightened and lifted his head, moving it quickly from side to side as he strove to identify a moving object far below him that had risen suddenly into sight on one of the valley swells and disappeared again in a wash. It was a horse, he knew, but whether it was a roamer of the range or a beast bearing a rider, he could not tell. He waited anxiously for its reappearance, again hoping and fearing.

"Huh! You're carryin' nobody," he muttered aloud as the speck again came into view. "An' you sure are goin' some particular place!"

The animal was too far distant to be readily identified but about its swing was a familiar something and, inspired by an idea, Bayard returned to the house, emerged with a field glass and focused it on the approaching horse. The animal was his sorrel stallion.

"Come on, Abe," he said aloud, putting down the binoculars with a hand that trembled. "They've sent you on home, or you've got away. . . . But how about th' party you carried off?"

He walked to the gate and stood uneasily awaiting

the arrival of the animal. As the sorrel came into sight from the nearest wash into which he had disappeared he was moving at a deliberate trot, but when he made out the figure of his waiting master he strode swifter, finally breaking into a gallop and approaching at great speed, whinnying from time to time.

The bridle reins were knotted securely about the horn. He had not escaped; Abe had been sent home. He stopped before Bruce and nuzzled the man's hands as they caressed his hot, soft nose.

"It looks as if they had trouble before they left, from th' way my room is," the man said to the horse as he stroked his nose, "but I know right well he'd never got you out of that corral alone an' never got you off in that direction unless somebody'd helped him; she might make you mind 'cause she rode you once. If it wasn't for that . . . I'd think she'd been forced . . . 'cause they must have had a racket. . . ."

He led the horse through the gate and into the corral. There, he slipped the bridle off, uncinched and dragged the saddle toward him. As the polished, darkened seat turned to the bright sunlight, he saw that the leather had been defaced and, indignation mounting, he leaned over to inspect it. The resentment departed, a mingling of fear and triumph and rage rose within him, for on the saddle had been scratched in hasty, crude characters:

BOUND FOR MI
NE
HELP

No need to speculate as to the author of that message on the saddle. That Ann had been forced by circumstances to do the work furtively was as evident. And the combination of facts which rode uppermost in his confused mentality was this. Ann Lytton was being taken to the Sunset mine against her will; she had appealed to him for aid and, because of that, he knew that she had chosen between the two, between her husband and her honorable lover!

For a moment, mad, hot triumph filled him. He had done his best with the ruin of a man he had set out to reconstruct; he had groomed him well, conscientiously, giving him thorough care, great consideration, just to satisfy his own moral sense; he had given him back to Ann at the cost of intense suffering . . . and it had not been enough for her; she was not satisfied. Beside her husband, bound for her husband's mountain home, she had found herself in her hour of need and had cried out to him for help!

Bruce calculated swiftly as he stood there. Lytton's trail from the ranch led straight eastward, toward the Sunset group. They had not ridden the whole forty-five miles at one stretch. He was satisfied of that. Obviously, they had stopped for the night and out in that country toward which they had started was only one ranch that would not take them miles out of their course. That was the home of Hi Boyd, a dozen miles straight east, six miles south and east from Yavapai, thirty-three miles from the Sunset group. By now

they were making on, they could finish their journey before night. . . .

And then recurred a thought that Bruce had overlooked in those moments of speculation, of quick thinking:

"Good God, Benny Lynch's waitin' for him . . . with murder in his heart!" he cried aloud, the horror at the remembrance so sharp, the meaning of this new factor in the situation so portentous, that the words came from his lips unconsciously. He stood beside the horse, staring down at the message on the saddle again, bewildered, a feeling of helplessness coming over him.

"I can't let that happen, Abe, I can't!" he said. "I drove him there. . . . He must have gone because . . . He's found out she was here all along . . . he's blamed it on me. . . . He's crazy mad an' he's ridin' straight to his end! . . . It would free her, but I can't let it happen . . . not that way . . .

"It's up to you to get me to town," he cried as he reached for the bridle. "Just to Yavapai . . . that's all. . . . You're th' best horse in th' southwest, but they've got too much of a start on you. We'll try automobiles this once, Pardner!"

In an incredibly short time the saddle was on, cinch tight. He gathered the reins, called to the sorrel and Abe, infected with his excitement, wheeled for the gate, the man running by his side. As the animal rounded into the road, Bruce vaulted into the saddle,

pawed with his right foot for the flopping stirrup and leaning low on Abe's neck, shouted into his ears for speed.

Merely minutes transpired in that eight-mile race to Yavapai. Bayard's idea was to hire the one automobile of which the town boasted, start down the valley road that Lytton and Ann must follow to reach the mine, overtake and turn them back, somehow, on some pretext. He could arrange the device later; he could think of the significance of Ann's appeal to him when the man between them was free from the danger of which Bayard was aware; his whole thought now was to beat time, to reach town with the least possible waste of seconds. The steel sinews, the leather lungs, the great heart of the beast under him responded nobly to this need. They stormed along the wagon tracks when they held straight, thundered through the unmarked grass and over rocks when the highway turned and twisted. Once, when they ran through a shallow wash and Abe climbed the far side with a scramble, fire shot from his shoes and Bruce cried,

"You're th' stallion shod with fire, boy!"

It was a splendid, unfaltering run, and, when the rider swung down before the little corrugated iron building that housed Yavapai's motor car, the stallion was black with water and his breath came and went with the gasps of fatigue and nervous tension.

Bruce turned from his horse and stepped toward the

open door of the garage. A man was there, behind the car, looking dolefully down at an array of grease covered parts that littered the floor.

"Jimmy, I want you to take me out on th' Valley road this mornin'. How soon can we get away?"

"It won't be this mornin' or this afternoon, Bruce," the man said, with a shake of his head. "I've got a busted differential."

"Can't it be fixed?"—misgiving in his voice.

"Not here. I have to send to Prescott for a new one. I'll be laid up a couple of days anyhow."

Bayard did not answer. Just stood trying to face the situation calmly, trying to figure his handicap.

"Is it awful important, Bruce?" the man asked, struck by the cowman's attitude.

"I guess th' end of th' world's more important,"—as he turned away, "but to me, an' compared to this, it's a small sized accident."

He walked slowly out into the street and paused to look calculatingly at Abe. Then, turning abruptly, struck by a new possibility, he ran across to the Manzanita House, entered the door, strode into the office, took down the telephone receiver and rattled the hook impatiently.

"I want Hi Boyd's ranch," he said to the operator. Then, after a wait in which he shifted from foot to foot and swore under his breath: "Hello . . . Boyd's? Is this Hi Boyd? It is? . . . Well Hi, this is Bruce

Bayard an' I've got to have a horse from you this mornin'. . . ."

"A horse!" came the thin, distant exclamation over the wire. "Everybody wants horses off me to-day. . . ."

"But I've *got* to have one, Hi! It's mighty important. Yours is th' only ranch that's on my way —"

". . . an' we let one get away this mornin'," the voice went on, not pausing for Bruce's insistence, "'fore daylight an' left a lady who spent th' night with us a foot. We had to go catch up another for 'em an' Lytton — Ned Lytton, was th' man — only got on two hours ago . . . three hours late! No, they ain't a horse on th' place that'll ride."

"Can't you catch one for me?" Bruce persisted.

"How? Run him down on foot? If I was a young man like you, I might, but now. . . ."

Bayard slammed up the receiver and turned away, staring at the floor. He walked into the street again, looking about almost wildly. One by one the agencies that might prevent the impending catastrophe out yonder had been rendered helpless. The automobile, the chance of getting a change horse, his haste in riding to Yavapai and its consequent inroads made upon Abe's strength.

"I'm playin' with a stacked deck!" he muttered, as he approached the stallion. "There ain't another horse in this country equal to you even after your

mornin's work," he said, looking at the breathing, sweat darkened creature. "I wouldn't ask you to do it for anybody else, Boy. But . . . won't you do it for her? She sent for me. Will you take me back? It'll mean a lot to her, let alone what it means to me . . . if I don't stop him.

"It's thirty-five miles for us to make while they're doin' little more 'n twenty, for they've been traveling since dawn. Maybe it'll be you're last run. . . . It may break your heart. . . . How about it?"

In his desperation, something boyish came into his tone, his manner, and he appealed to his horse as he would have pleaded with another human being. The sorrel looked at him inquiringly, great intelligent eyes unblinking, ears forward with attentiveness and, after a moment, the white patch on his nose twitched and he moved closer against his master as he gave a low little nicker.

"Is that your answer, Abe? Are you sayin' yes?" Bayard asked, and unbuckled his chap belt. "Is it, old timer? You're . . . it's all up to you!" He kicked out of his chaps, flung them to the hotel porch, mounted, reined the stallion about and high in the stirrups, a live, flexible weight, rode out of town at a slow trot, holding the horse to the gait that the wind which blew in from the big expanse of country might cool him.

CHAPTER XVII

THE END OF THE VIGIL

Benny Lynch was at work in the face of the Sunset's lower tunnel. He swung his singlejack swiftly, surely, regularly, and each time it struck the drill, his breath whistled through his lips in the manner of mine workers. His candle, its stick secure in a crack above him, lighted the small chamber and under its uncertain, inefficient rays, his face seemed drawn and hard and old.

A fortnight ago, when he rode to the Circle A ranch to share with Bayard the secret that harassed him his countenance had been merely sober, troubled; but now it gave evidence of a severe strain that had endured long enough to wear down his stolidity — the tension that would naturally come to a man who is normally kind and gentle and who, by those same qualities, is driven to hunt a fellow human as he would plot to take the life of a dangerous animal. Through those two weeks he had been waiting alone in the mining camp, working eight hours each day, doing his cooking and housework methodically, regularly, telling himself that he had settled down to the routine of industriously developing property that was rightfully his, when that

occupation was only a ruse, a blind, when he was waiting there solely for the opportunity to kill! His watching had not been patient; it was outwardly deliberate, true, but inwardly it kept him in a continual state of ferment; witness the lines about his mouth, the pallor of his skin, the feverish, expectant look in his eyes.

On a spike in the timbering hung an alarm clock . . . and a gun belt, weighted with revolver and ammunition. At regular, frequent intervals, the blows of his jack were checked and he sat crouched there, head forward and a trifle to one side, as though he were listening. When no sound save the singing of his candle wick reached his ears, he went on, regularly, evenly, purposeful. Possibly the tension that showed about his mouth became more noticeable after each of these brief periods when he strained to catch sounds.

With a final blow Benny left off the rhythmic swing, wiped his forehead with a wrist, poured water from a small tin bucket into the hole on which he was at work and picked up his jack to resume the swinging. He glanced at the clock.

"It's time," he said aloud, his voice reverberating hollowly in the place.

He put down his hammer quickly and rose from his squatting position as though he had neglected to perform some important duty. He took down the gun belt, slung it about his waist, and, making a reflector of his hollowed hand for the candle, started out along the tunnel, walking swiftly, intent on a definite end. When he reached the point where the darkness of the drift

was dissipated by the white sunlight, he extinguished his feeble torch, jabbed the candlestick into the hanging-wall and reached for a pair of binoculars that, in their worn and battered case, hung from the timbering.

"This is 'n elegant day," he said aloud, as he walked out on to the dump, manipulating the focusing screw of the glass and looking cautiously around at the pine clad mountains which stretched away to right, left and behind him.

Evidently his mind was not on his words or on the idea; he was merely keeping up his game of pretense, while beneath the surface he was alert, expectant. Near the foot of the pile of waste rock was the log cabin with its red, iron roof and protruding stove pipe. Far below him and running outward like a great tinted carpet spread Manzanita Valley. Close in to the base of the hills on which he stood a range of bald, flat-topped, miniature buttes made, from his eminence, a low welt in its contour, but beyond that and except for an occasional island of knee-high oak brush it seemed to be without mar or blemish. Here and there patches of deeper color showed and the experienced eye knew that there the country swelled or was cut by washes, but, otherwise, it all seemed to be flat, unbroken.

On this immense stretch of country Benny trained the glass. His manner was intent, resolute. Each hour during daylight he had been making that observation for a fortnight; every time he had anticipated reward,

action. Aided by the lenses he picked out the low buttes, saw a spot that he knew was a grazing horse, a distant shimmering blotch of mellow white canopied by a golden aura that meant sheep, turned his body from left to right in swift, sweeping inspection.

And stopped all movement with a jerk, while an inarticulate exclamation came from him.

For the first time his sight had encountered that for which he had been seeking. He was motionless an instant, then lowered the glass to his chest-level and stared hard with naked eyes. He wet his lips with his tongue and strained forward, used the glasses again, shifted his footing, looking about with a show of bright nervousness, and rubbed the lenses on his shirt briskly.

"He ain't even waitin' to take th' road," he said aloud. "He's in a powerful hurry!"

Once more the instrument picked out the moving dot under that vast dome of brilliant blue sky and, for a lengthy interval Benny held his aided gaze upon it, watching it disappear and come into sight again, ever holding toward him through wash and over swells, maintaining its steady crawling. He moved further out on the dump to obtain a better view and leaned against the rusty ore car on its track that he might be steadier; for sight of that purposeful life down yonder had started ever so slight tremors through his stalwart limbs.

He muttered to himself, and again looked alertly about, right and left and behind. His eye was

brighter, harder. When he looked into the valley again, sweeping its expanse to find the horseman who had momentarily disappeared, he stood with gaze fixed in quite another direction and, when he had suppressed his breath an instant to make absolutely certain, he cried excitedly:

“In bunches! They’re comin’ in droves!”

He put down the binocular, took the six-gun from its holster, twirled the cylinder briskly and caressed the trigger with an eager finger. His mouth had become a tight, straight line and his brows were gathered slightly, as in perplexity. He breathed audibly as he watched those indications of human life on the valley. He knew then the greatest torment of suspense. . . .

Ten minutes later, when the near dot had become easily discernible to the naked eye, when the figure of horse and rider was in sharp detail through the glass, the ominous quality about the man gave way to frank mystification. He flung one leg over the corner of the ore car, and his face ceased to reflect his great determination, became puzzled, half alarmed.

“That’s Bruce’s stallion, if I ever seen him!” he thought, “An’ he’s been run to th’ last breath.”

The horse went out of sight, entered the timber below Benny and the clicking of stones, the sounds of shod hoofs floundering over bare rocks gave evidence that he would be at the mine level in another five minutes. The man hitched his gun belt about, took one more anxious, puzzled look down into the valley where

other figures moved, and walked down the trail toward the cabin slowly, watching through the pines for sight of the climbing animal.

A man came first, bent over that he might climb faster up the steep trail. He was leading a horse that was drenched from ear to ankle, lathered about neck and shoulder and flank, who breathed in short, low sobs, and stepped with the uneven awkwardness of utter fatigue. Benny stopped as he recognized Bayard and Abe and his right hand which had rested lightly on the gun butt at his hip dropped to his thigh. He stood still, waiting for them to come nearer, wondering anxiously what this might mean, for he knew that the owner of the sorrel stallion would never have ridden him to that condition without cause.

Bayard looked up, saw the man waiting for him and halted between strides, the one foot far advanced before the other. His face was white and he stared hard at the miner, studying him closely, dreading to ask the question that was at his lips. But after that momentary pause he blurted out,

"Is everything all right, Benny?"

And Lynch, shaken by Bruce's appearance, the manner of his arrival, countered:

"What's wrong? What is it?"—walking swiftly down the trail toward the newcomer.

"Has anybody been here before me, to-day?"

"Nobody, Bruce. What is it?"—anxiously, feeling somehow that they were both in danger.

"Thank God for that!" Bayard muttered, some of the intensity going from him, and turned to loose the cinch. "We weren't too late, Abe, we weren't." He dragged the saddle from the stallion's dripping back, flung it on the rocks behind him, pulled off the bridle and with hands that were not steady, stroked the lathered withers as the horse stood with head hung and let the breath sob and wheeze down his long throat while his limbs trembled under his weight. "We've come from town in th' most awful ride a horse ever made on this valley, Benny. Look at him! I had to ask him, I had to ask him to do this, to run his heart out for me; I had to do it!"

He stood looking at his horse and for the moment seemed to be wholly absorbed in contemplating the animal's condition; his voice had been uncertain as he pleaded the vague necessity for such a run.

"What is it, Bruce? Why was you in such a hurry?" Lynch asked, taking the cowman gently by the arm, turning him so that they confronted one another, an uneasy connection forming in his mind between his friend's dramatic arrival and his own purpose at the mine.

"Ned Lytton an' his wife are comin' here to-day, Benny,"—bluntly. "I had to get here before them to stop you . . . doin' what you've come here an' waited to do."

The other's hand dropped from Bruce's arm; in Benny's face the look of fear, of doubt, gave way to a

return of the strained, tense expression with its dogged determination. That was it! The woman, identified as such through his glass, was Lytton's wife! He felt the nerves tightening at the back of his neck.

"What do you mean by that . . . to stop me?" he asked, spreading his feet, arms akimbo, a growing defiance about him.

"What I said, Benny. I've come to stop a killin' here to-day. I thank God I was in time!"

His old assurance, his poise, which had been missing on his arrival, had returned and he stepped forward, reaching out a hand to rest on Benny's shoulder, gripping through the flannel shirt with his long, stout fingers.

"You told me your trouble with Lytton in confidence. I thought once this mornin' maybe I'd have to break that confidence. I thought when I started up this trail that I must be too late to do any good, but now I'm here I know you'll understand, old timer, I know you'll understand!"

He shook Lynch gently with his hand and smiled, but no responsive light came from the miner's eyes in return; hostility was there, along with the fever of waiting.

"No, I don't understand," he said, sharply. "I don't understand why you're throwin' in with that scum."

"Don't think that! It's not for him I'm doin' this. I wouldn't ask my Abe to run himself sick for him."

It's for my own peace of mind an' yours, Benny."

"My mind 'll be at peace when I've squared my dad's account with Lytton an' not before!"—with a significant gesture toward his gun.

"But mine won't, an' neither will yours when you know that by comin' to me with your story you tied me hand an' foot! Hand an' foot, Benny, that's what! I've never been helpless before, but I am this time; if Lytton comes to any harm from you here to-day, his blood'll be on my hands. I know he's a snake, I know he knifed your daddy in th' back,"—growing more intense, talking faster, "But he's wrong, Benny, wrong in th' head. A man can't get so lowdown as he is an' not be wrong.

"Oh, I know him. I know him better than you or anybody else does! I've been nursin' him for weeks. He's been at my ranch —"

"At your —"

"Yes, at my ranch. I took him there a month ago, Benny, to make a man of him for his wife, the sweetest woman that God ever made live to make us men better. I've been groomin' him up for her, workin' with him, hatin' him, but doin' my best to make a man of him. Now, he's bringin' her here by force because of me, an' she sent back for me . . . asked me to help her. She knows there's danger here. I didn't tell her why, but I told her that much, told her never to let him come back. Now he's forcin' her to come with him an' she sent for me.

"Don't you see? I can't let you shoot him down! Can't you see that, Benny?"

He shook him again and leaned forward, face close to face.

"No, I don't see that it makes any difference," Lynch said slowly, a hard calm covering his roused emotions.

Bayard drew back a step and a quick flush swept into his cheeks.

"But I sent him here, Benny; knowin' you were waitin'. It's my fault if he —"

"You sent him?"

"Yes, I drove him out here! He might never have come back, if it hadn't been for me. I . . . Nobody else knows this, Benny; maybe nobody ever will but you, but I've got to make you understand. He . . . She . . . His wife's been in town a month. She come out here to throw herself away on that rat, when she don't . . . when she hates him.

"I can't tell you all of it, but yesterday he saw her for th' first time. .

"He must have raised hell with her . . . because of me, because I've known she was out here and didn't tell him. He took her away an' she . . . sent for me. . . .

"Don't you see that I'm to blame? Hell, it's no use hidin' it; he took her off to get her away from me! He's bringin' her here, th' nearest place to a home he's got. If 't wasn't, for me, he wouldn't have started for

this place; he'd stayed there. Don't you see, Benny, that I'm drivin' him into your hands. You may be justified in killin', but I ain't justified . . . in helpin you!"

"If it's that way . . . between she an' you . . . you'd ought to be glad. . . ."

"Not that way!" Bayard exclaimed. "Not that, Benny! He's everything you've called him, but I can't foul him. I've got to be more'n square with him because he is . . . her husband an' because she did . . . send for me!"

For a moment the miner seemed to waver; a different look appeared in his eyes, an appreciation for the absolute openness of this man before him, his great sense of fair play, his honesty, his sincerity. Then, he remembered that minutes had been consumed, that his game was drawing to a climax.

"I can't help it," he said, doggedly, drawing back, "We understand each other now, Bruce, an' my advice to you is to clear out. Things 'll happen right soon."

"What do you mean?" slowly, with incredulity.

"Don't you know they wasn't a mile behind you, on th' other side of them low bluffs?"

Bayard half turned, sharply, as though he expected to find Ann and Lytton directly behind him on the trail.

"God, no!" he answered in a hushed tone. "Rough country, that's why I didn't see 'em."

"Well, that's them . . . a man an' woman. They ought to be here any minute."

Lynch's voice sank to a whisper on the last and he drew the gun from its scabbard, peering down the trail, listening. On sight of the colt, a flicker came into Bayard's eyes, his jaw tightened, his shoulders squared themselves.

"I'll go down an' meet him," the miner said quite calmly, though the color had gone even from his lips. "It's . . ."

With a drive of his hand, Bayard's fingers fastened on the gun and the jerk he gave the weapon tore Lynch from his footing.

"You'll not, Benny!"—in a whisper, securing the gun, and flinging it into the brush behind him, gripping the other man by his shirt front, "You won't, by God, if I have to choke you black in the face!"

Lynch drew back against the cabin wall, struggling to free himself.

"It's my fight, Bruce!" . . . breathing in gasps, eyes wide, voice strained almost to the point of sobbing.

"I'll let go when you promise me to go into your house an' sit there an' keep quiet until I finish my work . . . or, until you're molested."

"Not after two years! Not after my dad. . . ."

Tears stood in the miner's eyes and he struck out viciously with his fists; then Bayard, thrusting his head forward, flung out his arms in a clinging, binding embrace and they went down on the trail, a tangle of limbs.

Benny was no match in such a combat and in a trice he was on his face, arms held behind him and Bayard was lashing his wrists together with his bridle reins.

"Stand up!" he said, sharply, when he had finished.

He picked up the revolver and, with a hand under one of the bound arms, helped Benny to his feet.

"I'll apologize later. I'll do anything. I came out here to prevent a killin', Benny, an' my work ain't done yet."

The miner cursed him in a strained voice and the come and go of his breath was swift and irregular. He trembled violently. All the brooding he had experienced in the last months, all the strain of waiting he had known in the recent days, the conviction that his hour of accomplishment was at hand, and the sudden, overwhelming sense of physical helplessness that was now on him combined to render his anger that of a child. He attempted to hold back, but Bayard jerked him forward and, half dragged, half carried, he entered the kitchen of the cabin he had helped build, which had been stolen from him and which was now to be his prison at the moment when he had planned to make his title to the property good by killing. . . .

Bayard, too, trembled, and his gray eyes glittered. He breathed through his lips and was conscious that his mouth was very dry. His movements were feverish and he handled Lynch as though he were so much insensate matter.

Benny protested volubly, shouting and screaming and kicking, trying to resist with all his bodily force, but Bruce did not seem to hear him. He handled his captive with a peculiar abstraction in spite of the fact that they struggled constantly.

Bayard kicked a chair away from the table, forced Lynch into it and holding him fast with one arm, drew the dangling bridle reins through the spindles of the back and lashed the miner's bound wrists there securely.

"I can't help it, Benny," he said, hurriedly and earnestly, as he straightened. "You and I . . . we'll have this out afterwards. . . . Your gun . . . I'll leave it here,"—putting the weapon on top of a battered cupboard that stood against the wall behind Benny.

"I'm goin' down to turn him back towards town, Benny. . . . I won't give you away; he won't know you're here, but I've got to do it myself. I can't let you kill him to-day . . . I can't, because I'm to blame for his comin' here!"

He was gone then, with a thudding of boots and a ringing of spurs as he ran from the room, struck into the trail and went down among the pines at a pace which threatened a nasty fall at every stride. And Benny, left alone, whimpered aloud and tugged ineffectually at the knots which held him captive in his chair. After a short interval, he stopped the struggling and strained forward to listen. No sound reached his ears except the low, sweet, throaty tweeting

of quail as they ran swiftly over the rocks, under a clump of brush and disappeared. The world was very quiet and peaceful . . . only in the man's heart was storm. . . .

Bayard ran on down the trail toward the edge of the timber where he might look out on the valley and see those two riders he had followed and passed without seeing. He had no plan. He would tell Lytton to go back, would *make* him go back, with nothing but his will and his naked hands. He wanted to laugh as he ran, for his relief was great; there was to be no killing that day, no blood was to be on his conscience, no tragedy was to stand between him and the woman who had called for aid.

His pace became reckless, for the descent was steep and, when he emerged from the timber, his whole attention was centered on keeping himself upright and overcoming his momentum. When he could stop, he lifted his eyes to the country below him, searched quickly for the figures of Ned and his wife and swore in perplexity. He did not see sign of a moving creature. He knew that there was no depression in that part of the valley deep enough to hide them from him as he stood on that vantage point. Had Lynch been mistaken? Had he deceived him artfully?

He looked about bewildered, wholly at a loss to explain the situation. Then ran on, searching the trail for indication of passing horses. They could not have turned back and ridden from sight in the short time that

had elapsed since Benny saw them . . . if he had seen them. Where could they go, but on to the mine?

The worn trail still led him down grade, though the pitch was not so severe as it had been higher up; however, he did not realize the distance he was from timber when he came upon fresh horse tracks. They had ridden up to that point at a walk; they had stopped there, and when they went on they had swerved to the right and ridden for the hills with horses at a gallop.

Bayard read the tell-tale signs in an instant, wheeled, looked up at the abrupt slopes above him and cried,

"He's gone around for some reason . . . in a hurry. . . . To come into camp from behind!"

And trembling at thought of what might be happening back there in the cabin, he started up the trail, running laboriously against the steep rise of the hill.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FIGHT

Bayard had guessed rightly. After miles of silent riding Lytton had pulled his horse up with a jerk, had laid a hand on Ann's bridle and checked her pony with another wrench.

"Who's that?" he growled, staring at Bayard.

She had looked at the distant horse, floundering up the slope beyond them, recognized both Abe and his rider and had turned to stare at her husband with fear in her eyes.

"Who is it?" he demanded again, and she dropped her gaze.

"So that's it!" he jeered. "Your lover is trying to play two games. He's come to beat us to it, has he?"—he licked his lips nervously. "Well, we'll see!"

He hung his spurs in and fanned her horse with his quirt and, still clinging to her bridle, led his wife at a high lope off to the right, swinging behind a shoulder of the hill and climbing up a sharp, wooded draw.

"I'll fool your friend!" he laughed, twenty minutes later when they had climbed a steep ridge and the winded horses had dropped into a walk. "I'll fool him!"

He drew Bayard's automatic, which he had taken from Ann, and looked it over in crafty anticipation.

Ann, after her night and her day of hardship, of ceaseless anxiety, could not cry out. A sound started but went dry and dead in her throat. She sat lax in her saddle, worn and confused and suddenly indifferent. She had been defiant yesterday afternoon for a time; she had been frightened later; with cunning she had scratched her warning on Abe's saddle and with like strategy she had managed to set the great horse free when they were preparing for their early morning start from the Boyd ranch. She had withstood her husband's taunts flung at her through their sleepless night, she had taken in silence his abuse when it became necessary to secure another horse; beside him she had ridden in silence down the valley, knowing him for a crazed man. And now sight of Bayard, the sense of relief that his nearness brought, the sudden fear for his safety at seeing the pistol, reduced her to helplessness.

"You wait here," she heard her husband say.

He followed the order with a threat of some sort, a threat against her life she afterward remembered, dismounted and walked away. At the time his departure left no impression on her. She sat limp in her saddle a long interval, then leaned forward and, face in her horse's mane, gave way to sobbing. The vent for that emotion was relief; how long she cried she did not know, but suddenly she found herself on the

ground, looking about, alive to the fact that the silence seemed like that of death.

Cautiously, Lytton crept up over the rocks after he left Ann. His movements gave no hint of his recent weakness; they were quick and jerky, but certain. His lids were narrowed and between them his eyes showed balefully. He held his weapon in his right hand, slightly elevated, ready to shoot. Moisture formed on his forehead and ran down over his cheeks. Now and then his gun hand trembled spasmodically and then he halted until it was firm again.

He knew these rocks well and took no chances of exposing himself. He slunk from tree to boulder and from boulder to brush, always making nearer camp, always ready for an emergency. He attained a point where he could look down on the cabin below him and stood there a long time, half crouched, poised, scanning every corner, every shadow. The corral was hidden from him and Abe, lying under a spreading juniper tree, was out of his range of vision. He listened as he watched but no sound came to him. Then he went on, down the ragged way.

At intervals of every few feet he halted and listened, repressing even his own breath that he might hear the slightest sound. But no movement, no vibration disturbed that crystal noontime until he had gone halfway to the red-roofed house below the dump. Then a bird fluttered from close beside him: a soft, abrupt, diminish-

ing whirr of wings and the man shrank back against the rock, lifting his gun hand high, breath hissing as it slipped out between his teeth, the craven in him shaking his limbs, gripping his throat. Discovery of what had startled him brought only slow relief, and minutes elapsed before he straightened and laughed silently to shame his nerves to steadiness.

A stone, loosened by his foot, rolled down before him to the next ledge, rattling as it went, and he squatted quickly, again afraid, yet alert. For he felt that noise emanating from his movements would precipitate developments. But nothing moved, no new sounds came to him.

He was not certain that Bayard had seen them out on the valley. He did not know of his wife's message for help; in his confused consciousness he had supposed that the cowman had ridden to the mine on some covetous errand and that Bruce was ignorant of the fact that he and Ann had left the Circle A. He did not even stop to remember that Bayard had come into sight and disappeared through the timber on Abe, and that the stallion had slipped away from them before dawn. He had leaped to the conclusion that Bruce would be in the log house down yonder or somewhere about the property. So he stalked on, lips dry and hot with the desire to kill. . . .

Lytton approached to within ten yards of the cabin without hearing more sounds. There he straightened to his toes and stretched his neck to look about, peering

over the tops of oak brush that flourished in the scant soil, and, as he reached his full height, the sharp sound of a chair scraping on the floor sent him to a wilting, quivering squat, caused his breath to come in gasps, made his hands sweat until the pistol he held was slippery with their moisture. His head roared with excitement, but through it he thought he heard the sound of a man's voice lifted in speech.

No window was visible to him from his position. The back door of the kitchen stood open, he could see, but his view of the room through it was negligible. At the other end of the room was a door and a window, but he dared not risk advance from that direction. He crouched there, panting, fearing, yet planning quickly, driven to desperation by the urge of the hate which rankled in him. Bruce Bayard had attempted to steal his wife, he repeated to himself, he had attempted to frighten him away from his other property, his mine, and he was roused to a pitch of nervous excitement that carried him beyond the caution of mental balance and yet did not stimulate him to the abandon of actual madness. He wanted Bayard's life with all the lust that can be stirred in men by an outraging of the sense of possession and the passion of jealousy . . . beyond which there can be no destroying desire.

No other sounds came from the house, but he was satisfied that the man waiting within was his man and he skulked from the brush, choosing his footing with care, treading on the balls of his feet, preventing the

stiff branches from slapping noisily together by his cautious left hand. Slow, cat-like in his movements, he covered the distance to the cabin, flinging out an arm on the last step as though he were falling and with it steadying himself against the log wall of the building, where he balanced a moment, becoming steady.

He strained to listen and caught sounds of a man's breath expelled in grunts. The doorway was not six feet from the place where he had halted and he eyed it calculatingly, noting the footing he must cross, licking his lips, eyes strained wide open. He took the first step forward and halted, hand against the wall still to maintain his balance; then on again, lifting the foot slowly, setting it down with great pains, putting his weight on it carefully. . . .

And then nervous tension snapped. He could no longer hold himself back and with a lunge he reached the door, gripped the casing with his left hand and, crouching, swung himself into the doorway, pistol extended before him, coming to a halt with an inarticulate, sobbing cry that might have been hate or chagrin or only fright. . . . For the man he covered with that weapon was a stranger, an individual he had never seen before, sitting in a chair, back to him, his pale, startled face turned over the near shoulder, giving the intruder frightened gaze for frightened gaze.

For a moment Lytton remained swaying in the doorway, bewildered, unable to think. Then, he saw that the other man was bound to his chair, his hands behind

him, and he let go his hold on the casing, straightened and put one foot over the threshold. He spoke the first words,

"Who are you?"—in a tone just above a whisper, leaning forward, sensing in a measure an explanation of this situation. And because of this intuitive flash of comprehension, he did not give the other opportunity to answer his first question, but said quickly, lowly, "What are you doing here?"

Benny looked at him, studying, a covered craftiness coming into his face to obliterate the anxiety, the rebelliousness that had been there. His semi-hysteria was gone, his cold, hard determination to carry his mission to its conclusion had reasserted itself but covered, this time, by cunning. He realized what had happened, knew that Lytton had expected to find another there, he saw that he was ready to kill on sight, and in the situation the miner read a way out for himself, a method of attaining his own ends. So he said,

"I'm takin' a little rest; can't you see?"—ironical in his answer to Lytton's question, impatient when he put his own counter query.

He wrenched at the bonds angrily and, partly from the exertion, partly from the rage that rose within him, his face colored darkly.

Lytton stepped further into the room, approaching Lynch's chair, looking closely into his face, gun hand half lowered.

"Who tied you up?" he asked in a whisper, for his

mind was centered about a single idea; the probable presence of Bayard and his relation to this man who was some one's prisoner.

Benny looked down at the floor and leaned over and again tugged at the knots for he dared not reveal his face as he growled,

"A damn dirty cowpunch!"

The other man said nothing; waited, obviously for more information.

"His name's Bayard," Benny muttered.

He rendered the impression that he regarded that specific information as of no consequence, but he heard the catch of a sound in Lytton's throat and saw him shift his footing nervously.

"How long ago?" he asked.

"Too damn long to sit here like this!"—in anger that was not simulated, for with every word that passed between them, Benny felt his reason slipping, felt that if this situation continued long enough he must rise with the chair bound fast to him and try to do harm to this other man.

"Where'd he go?"

Lytton bent low as he whispered excitedly and his gun hand hung loosely at his side.

Benny shook his head.

"I dunno," he said. "He went off some're, but he won't be gone long, that's a good bet! He was up to somethin'—God knows what. Guess he thought I'd spoil it."

He looked up and saw the glitter of Lytton's eyes.

"Up to something is he?" Lytton laughed, dryly, repeating Lynch's words. "Up to something! He's always up to something. He's been up to something for weeks, the wife stealing whelp . . . and now if I know what I'm talking about, he's up *against* something!"

"Wife stealer, is he?" Benny laughed as he put that question and was satisfied when he saw Ned's jaw muscles bulge. "That's his latest, is it?"

Lytton looked at him pointedly.

"You know him pretty well, too?" he asked.

"Know him! Do I know him? Look at this!"—with a slight lift of his bound hands. "That's how much I know him. . . . I seem to have a fair enough acquaintance, don't I?"

"Say, *hombre*, you turn me loose an' set here an' I'll pack him in to you . . . on my back . . . if you're lookin' for him that way!"

Lytton looked quickly about; then stood still to listen; the silence was not broken and he stared back at the bound man, a new interest in his face, as he framed his hasty diplomacy.

"Do you mean you've . . . got a fight with this man? With Bayard?"

Benny moved from side to side in his chair and forced a laugh.

"Have I?" he scoffed. "Have I? You just wait until I get loose an' get my fingers on *him*. You'll

think it's a fight, party. . . . But I'm in a fine way to do anythin' now! "

He looked through the front doorway, out down the sharp draw that the trail to the valley followed. Lytton stepped nearer to him and as he spoke his voice became eager and rapid,

"I've a quarrel with him, too!" The craven in him drove him forward to this newly offered hope, the hope of finding an ally, some one to share his burden of responsibility, some one he could hide behind, some one, perhaps, who might be inveigled into doing his fighting for him. "I came here to hunt him down. When I came down that hill there,"—gesturing—"I thought he was in here because I heard your chair move on the floor. When I jumped through that door and covered you, I expected he'd be here and that I'd . . . Well, that I'd square accounts with him for good. . . .

"I don't know what your fight with him is, but he's abused you; he's got you hog-tied now. That you've a fight of some sort with him is enough for me. . . . Aren't two heads better than one?"—insinuatingly.

The miner forced himself to meet that inquiring gaze steadily, but his expression of delight, of triumph, which came into his face was not forced, was not counterfeit, and he growled quickly:

"I don't need any man's help in my fight . . . when I got an even chance. My troubles are my own an' I'll tend to 'em, but, if you want to do me a favor, you'll

cut these damn straps . . . you'll give me a chance to fight, man to man!"

He did not lie with those words; his inference might have been deception but that chance to fight man to man was the dearest privilege he could have been offered.

No primitive urge to punish with his own hands a man who had crossed him made itself paramount with Lytton; he wanted Bayard to suffer, but the means did not matter. If he could cause him injury and avoid the consequence of personal accountability, so much the better, and it was with a grunt of relief and triumph that he shoved the automatic into the waist band of his pants, drew a knife from his pocket and grasped the tightly knotted straps.

"You bet, I'll help anybody against that dirty —

"Sit still!" he broke off, as Benny, quivering with excitement, strained forward. "I'm likely to cut you if —"

The blade slashed through the leather. Lynch floundered to his feet, free, alone in the room with the man he had deliberately planned to kill, and the overwhelming sense of impending achievement swept all caution from him.

He stumbled a step or two forward after the suddenly parting of the straps set him free and then turned about to face Lytton, who stood beside the chair closing his knife. Behind the Easterner was the cupboard on which Bayard had placed Benny's gun, and the miner's

first idea should have been to restrain himself, to keep on playing a strategic game, to move carefully, deliberately until he was armed and could safely show his hand.

But such control was an impossibility. He faced Ned Lytton who stood there with an evil smile on his lips, and all the love for his dead father, all the outraged sense of property rights, all the brooding, the waiting, the accumulated tension caused something in him to swell until he felt a choking sensation, until the hate came into his face, until he drew his clenched fists upward and shook his head and bellowed and charged, madly, blindly, wanting only to have his hands on his enemy, to take his life as the first men took the lives of those who had done them wrong! The feel of perishing flesh in his palms . . . that was what he wanted!

With a shrill cry of fright, Lytton saw what happened. He saw the change come over the face, the body, the manner of this man before him, saw Lynch gather himself for the rush and, whipping his hand down to his stomach as he backed and tried to run, he clutched for the weapon that would defend him from this new foe.

But the hand did not close on the pistol butt then. His wrist was caught in the clamp of incredibly powerful fingers that bound about it and wrenched it backward; the other hand was pinned to his side by an encircling arm and the breath was beaten from him as

Lynch's impact sent them crashing into the wall.

"You will, will you?" Benny snarled thickly. "Cheat an' steal an' . . . lie."

They strained so for a moment, faces close together, the eyes of the miner glittering hate, those of Lytton reflecting the mounting fear, that possessed him.

"Who are you?" he screamed. "You . . . you snake!"

"I'm Lynch . . . Lynch! Son of an old man you cheated an' killed!" Benny shouted. "I've waited for years for this. . . . 'T was Bayard, th' man you hunted, tied me up so I couldn't . . . kill you. But you . . . walked into your own trap. . . ."

"You sna —"

Lytton's word was cut off by the jerk the miner gave him, dragging him to the center of the floor, bending him backward, struggling to hold him with one hand and secure the pistol with the other. Ned screamed again and drew his knee up with a vigorous snap, jamming it into Benny's stomach, sending the breath moaning from him. For the following moment Lytton held the upper hand but Lynch clung to him instinctively, unthinkingly, wrapping his arms and legs about Ned's body with a determination to save himself until he could beat down the sickness that threatened to overwhelm him. He did hold on, but his grip had lost some of its strength and, when his vision cleared and his mind became agile again, he felt Lytton's hand between their bodies, knew that it had fastened on the

weapon it had been seeking. He rallied his every force to overcome that handicap.

Ned's gun hand came free and he flung himself sideways in an effort to turn and yank himself from Lynch, but the miner closed on him, caught the forearm again in a mighty clamp of fingers and swept him smashing against the one window of the room. The glass went out with a crash and a jingle and the tough, dry wood of the frame snapped with a succession of sharp reports. Blood gushed down Lytton's cheek where a jagged pane had scratched the flesh as it fell and Lynch was conscious that warm moisture spread over his own upper left arm.

The Easterner braced against the window sill and grunted and squirmed until he forced his adversary back a body's breadth. . . . Then he kicked sharply, viciously and his boot toe crunched on Lynch's shin, sending a paralyzing pain through the limb. They swirled and staggered to the far end of the room in their struggles, the one bent on holding the other's body close to his to controvert its ceaseless efforts to worm away; and above their heads was the gun, gripped by fingers that were in turn clinched in a huge, calloused palm and rendered helpless.

"You snake!" Lytton cried again, and flung his head up sharply, catching Lynch under the chin with a sharp click of bone on bone.

They poised an instant at that, lurched clumsily against the stove and sent it toppling from its legs while

the pipe sections rattled hollowly down about them, and a cloud of soot rose to fill their eyes. They lunged into the wall again and hung against it a long, straining moment, breathless in their efforts; then, grunting as Lytton wriggled violently to escape, Benny steadily tightened his hold on him.

Intervals of dogged waiting followed, after which came frantic contortions as they lost and gathered strength again. Lytton's face was covered with blood and some of it smeared on Lynch's cheek. Sweat made their flesh glisten and then became mud as the soot mantled them. Occasionally one called out in a curse, or in an exclamation of pain, but much of the time their jaws were set, their lips tight, for both knew that this fight was to the end; that their battle could finish in but one of two ways.

Each time they faced the cupboard Benny shot a glance at its top. His gun was there; to reach it was his first hope, but he dared not relinquish for a fractional second his dogged grip on the other man's hand.

Lytton renewed his efforts, kicking and bunting. They waltzed awkwardly across the floor on a diagonal and Benny, backing swiftly on to the overturned chair to which he had been bound, tripped and lost his balance again. They went down with mingled cries, Lytton on top. For an instant he retained the position and threatened to break away, but Benny rolled over, hooking the other's limbs to helplessness with his own. He withdrew his right arm from about Lytton's waist and

grappled for the man's throat while Ned writhed and kicked, flung his head from side to side and struck desperately with his own free fist against the throttling fingers. He loosed one leg and threshed it frantically, found a bearing point against the wrecked stove, bowed his body with a wracking effort and for an instant was out from under, restrained only by the hot, hard fingers about his gun hand. He strove to reach up and transfer the pistol to his left, but Benny was the quicker and they rose to their feet, scrambling and snarling as they sought fresh holds.

Lynch had the advantage of weight but Lytton's agility offset the handicap. His muscles might not be able to endure so long a strain, but they responded more quickly to his thoughts, took lightninglike advantage of any opportunity offered. The fact enraged Benny and, giving way to it, he called on his precious reserve of energy for a super effort, lifted Ned from his feet and spun about as though he would dash his body against the wall. But Ned met this new move with the strength of the frenzied, and, when they had made three-quarters of the turn, Lynch was overbalanced; he stumbled, lurched and with a crash and a rip they went against the battered old cupboard.

The jolt steadied the men, but the big fixture, rocking slowly, went over sideways with a smash of breaking dishes and a rattling, banging of pans. And from its top, spinning and sliding across the cluttered floor, went Benny's big blue Colt gun.

Both men saw at once and on sight of that other weapon their battle became reversed. Lynch, glassy eyed, struggled to extricate himself now, to retain his hold on Lytton's hand that held the automatic, but to free his other, to stoop and recover his own revolver. Ned understood fully on the first move. He wrenched repeatedly to gain use of the automatic, but he clung with arms and legs and teeth to Lynch . . . wherever he could find purchase. He succeeded at first in working the fight back into a corner away from the revolver, but his strength was not lasting.

Benny redoubled his efforts and slowly they shifted again toward the center of the room where the reflected sunlight made the blue metal of the Colt glisten as it lay in the wreckage. They both breathed aloud now and Lytton moaned at each acute effort he made to meet and check his enemy's moves. With painful slowness, with ominous steadiness, they made back toward Lynch's objective, inch by inch, zigzagging across the floor, hesitating, swaying backward, but always keeping on. The violence of their earlier struggle had departed; they were more deliberate, more cautious, but the equality of their ability had gone. Lytton was yielding.

Benny got to within four feet of the revolver, gained another hand's breadth by a strain that set the veins of his forehead into purple welts. He bent sideways, forcing Ned's right hand with its pistol slowly down toward the floor. Then, with a slip and a scramble, Lyt-

ton left off his restraining hold, flung himself backward, spun his body about and with a cry of desperation put every iota of energy into an attempt to wrest his right hand from Benny's clutch.

Lynch let him go, but with a motive; for as he released his grip, he swung his right fist mightily, following it with the whole weight of his falling body. The blow caught Lytton on the back of the neck, staggered him, sent him pitching sideways toward the doorway and as Lynch, pouncing to the floor on hands and knees, fastened his fingers on his gun, Ned flashed a look over his shoulder, saw, knew that he could never turn and fire in time, and plunged on through the doorway, falling face downward into the dust, rolling over and fronting about . . . out of the miner's sight . . . pistol covering the door and broken window where Benny must appear . . . if he were to appear.

And the miner, within the ruined room, knees bent, torso doubled forward, gun in his hand, cocked, uplifted, waited for some sound, some indication from out there. None came and he straightened slowly, backing against the wall, wiping the sweat from his eyes one at a time that his vigilance might not be relaxed, gun ready to belch the instant Lytton should show himself . . . if he were to show himself.

So they watched, hidden from one another, each knowing that his enemy waited only for him to make a move, each aware that he could not bring the other into range without exposing himself. After the bang and

clatter of their hand to hand struggle, the silence was oppressive, and Benny, head turned to catch the slightest sound, thought that he could hear the quick come and go of Lytton's breath.

The man inside quivered with impatience; the one who waited in that white sunlight cowered and paled as the flush of exertion ebbed from his daubed face. Benny, whose whole purpose in life centered about squaring his account, as he saw it, with the man outside yearned to show himself, but held back, not through fear of harm, but because he knew that the fulfillment of his mission depended wholly upon his own bodily welfare. Lytton, quailing before the actual presence of great danger, of meeting a foe on equal footing, of fighting without resort to surprise or fouling, wanted to be away, to be quit of the place at any cost. He would have run for it, but he knew that the sounds of his movements would bring Lynch on his heels. He would have attempted to get away by stealth but he feared that he might encounter Bayard in any direction. He did not stop to think that he had no reason for fearing the cowman; his very guilt, his subconscious disrespect of self, made him regard an open meeting with Bruce as one of danger.

So for many minutes, the tension of the situation becoming greater, more unbearable with each pulse beat.

Then sounds — faint at first. The rattle of a stone rolling over rock, the distant swish of brush. A silent interval, followed by the sound of a gasping

cough; then, the faint, clear ring of a spur as the boot to which it was strapped set itself firmly on solid footing.

Within the house Lynch could not hear, but Lytton, alert to every possibility, dreading even the sound of his own breathing, turned his head sharply. . . .

There, below, making up the trail as fast as his exhausted limbs could carry him, came Bruce Bayard, hat in one hand, arms swinging widely as he strained to climb faster. He turned an angle of the trail and for the space of thirty yards the way led across a ledge of smooth, flat rock, screened by no trees and bearing no vegetation whatever.

Fear again retreated from Lytton's heart before a fresh rush of wrath that blinded him and made him heedless. He whirled, leaving off his watching of the cabin door and window. His gun hand came up, slowly, carefully, while he gritted his teeth to steady his muscles. He sighted with care, bringing all his knowledge of marksmanship to bear that there should be no error, that no possible luck of Bayard's should avail him anything. . . .

And from above and behind the cabin rose a woman's voice:

"Look out, Bruce!"

Just those words, but the bell-like quality of the voice itself, the horror in its shrill tone carrying sharply to them, echoing and re-echoing down the gulch, struck a chill to the hearts of three men.

The words had not left Ann's lips before the automatic in Ned's hand leaped and flashed and the echo of the woman's warning cry was followed by the smashing reverberations of the shot. But her scream had availed; it had sent a tremor through Lytton's body even as he fired, and, as Bayard halted abruptly in the center of the open space without barrier before him or weapon with which to answer, absolutely at Lytton's mercy, his hat was torn from his left hand.

"You whelp!" Ned cried, and on the word took one more step forward, halted, dropped the weapon on its mark again and paused for the merest fraction of time. His muscles became plastic, as steady as stone under the strain of this crisis. He did not hear the quick step on the kitchen floor, he could not see Benny Lynch half fall through the doorway, but when the miner's gun, held stiffly out from his hip, roared and belched and remained steady, ready to shoot again, Ned lowered the weapon just a trifle.

A queer, strained grin came over his face and, standing erect, he turned his head stiffly, jerkily toward Benny who stood crouched and waiting. Then, very slowly, almost languidly, his gun hand lowered itself. When it was almost beside his thigh, the fingers opened and the pistol dropped with a light thud to the earth. Ned lifted the other hand to his chest and still grinning, as if a joke had been made at his expense which quite embarrassed him, he let his knees bend as though he would kneel. He did not follow out the movement.

He wilted and fell. He tried to sit up, feebly, impotently. Then, he lay back with a quick sigh.

The other two men stood fixed for a moment. Then, with a cry, Bayard started up the slope at a run. He did not look again at Benny, did not know that the miner walked slowly forward to where Lytton had fallen. All he saw was the figure of a hatless woman, face covered with her hands, leaning against a great boulder twenty yards above the cabin, and he did not take his eyes from her during one step of the floundering run.

"Ann!" he called, as he drew near. "Ann!"

She turned with a quick, terrified movement and looked at him. He saw that her face was a mask, her eyes feverishly dry.

"He didn't —"

"No, Ann, he didn't," he answered, taking her hands in his, his voice unsteady. "Benny . . . he fired last . . . an' there'll be no more shootin'. . . ."

She swayed toward him.

"I sent for you," she began, brushing the hair out of her eyes with the back of one hand.

"An' I came, Ann."

"I . . . It was only chance . . . that I saw him and . . . screamed. . . ."

"But you did; an' it saved me."

"I sent for you, Bruce. . . . To take me away . . . from Ned. . . . To take me away from him . . . with you. . . ."

She stepped closer and with a quivering sigh lifted her arms wearily and clasped them about his neck, while Bayard, heart pounding, gathered her body close against his as the tears came and great convulsions of grief shook her.

He leaned back against the rock, holding her entire weight in his arms, and they were there for minutes, his lips caressing her hair, her temples, her cheeks. Her crying quieted, and, when she no longer sobbed aloud, he turned his head to look downward.

Benny Lynch was just then straightening from a stooping posture beside Lytton. He turned away, took a cartridge from his belt, slipped it into the chamber from which the empty piece of smoky brass had been removed and shoved the gun back into his holster. As it went home, he looked down at it curiously, stared a moment, drew it out again and examined it slowly, first one side, then the other. He shook his head and threw the weapon down the gulch, where it clattered on the rocks. After that, he walked toward the house, and about his movements was an indication of the sense of finality, of accomplishment, that filled him.

"I'll take you away, Sweetheart," Bayard whispered, gently. "But it won't be necessary to take you . . . away from Ned. . . ."

She shrank closer against him.

CHAPTER XIX

THE TRAILS UNITE

So it was that Ned Lytton ceased to be and with his going went all barriers that had existed between Ann and Bruce. Each had played a part in the grim drama which ended with violence, yet to neither could any echo of blame for Ned's death be attached. Their hands and hearts were clean.

Ann's appeal to Bruce for help when Ned led her away from the ranch had been made because she knew that real danger of some sort awaited Ned at the Sunset mine; she had not considered herself or her own safety at all.

Bruce, for his part, had concentrated his last energy on averting the tragedy. He had looked for the moment on his love of Ann only as a factor which had helped bring about the crisis, thereby making him accountable. To play the game as he saw it, to be squared with his own conscience, he had risked everything, even his life, in his attempt to save Lytton.

Ned's true self had come to the surface just long enough to answer all questions that might have been raised after his death. In that last experience of his life he had risen above his cowardice. After hearing

Ann's warning scream, he must have known that to fire on Bayard the second time meant his own death. Yet he was not dissuaded, just kept on attempting to satiate his lust for the rancher's life. So, utterly revealed, he died.

The fourth individual was to be considered — Benny Lynch. Through the months that he had brooded over the injustice which sent his father to a quick end, through the weeks that he had planned to administer his own justice, through the straining days that he had waited to kill, a part of him had been stifled. That part was the kindly, deliberate, peace loving Benny, and so surely as he was slow to anger he would have lived to find himself tortured by regret had he slain for revenge. As it was, he shot to save the life of a friend . . . and only that. He lived to thank the scheme of things that had called on him to untangle the skein which events had snarled about Bruce and the woman he loved . . . for it took from him the stain of killing for revenge.

Somehow, Bruce got Ann away from the Sunset mine that day. She was brave and struggled to bear up, but after the strain of those last weeks the fatigue of the ride Ned had forced her to take unnerved her and she was like a child when they gained the Boyd ranch where she was taken to the maternal arms of the mistress of that house, to be petted and cried over and comforted.

In his rattling, jingling buckboard Judson Weyl

drove out to the mining camp and beside a rock-covered grave murmured a prayer for the soul which had gone out from the body buried there; when he drove away, his chin was higher, his face brighter, reflecting the thought within him that an ugly past must be forgotten, that the future assured those qualities which would make it forgettable.

News of the killing roused Yavapai. In the first hour the community's attention was wholly absorbed in the actual affair at the mine, but, as the story lost its first edge of interest, inquisitive minds commenced to follow it backward, to trace out the steps which had led to the tragedy.

Ann's true identity became known. The fact that Bayard had sheltered Lytton was revealed. After that the gossip mongers insinuated and speculated. No one had known what was going on; when men hide their relationships with others and with women it must be necessary to hide something, they argued.

And then the clergyman, waiting for this, came forward with his story. He had known; his wife had known. Nora, the girl who had gone, had known. No, there had been no deception in Bayard's attitude; merely discretion. With that the talk ceased, for Yavapai looked up to its clergy.

Within the fortnight Ann boarded a train bound for the East. Her face had not regained its color, but the haunted look was gone from her eyes, the tensivity from about her lips. She was in a state of mental

and spiritual convalescence, with hope and happiness in sight to hasten the process of healing. Going East for the purpose of explaining, of making what amends she could for Ned's misdeeds, was an ordeal, but she welcomed it for it was the last condition she deemed necessary to set her free.

"It won't be long," she said, assuringly, when Bruce stood before her to say farewell, forlorn and lonely looking already.

"It can't be too quick," he answered.

"Impatient?"

"I'd wait till 'th' stars grow old an' th' sun grows cold,'" he quoted with his slow smile, "but . . . it wouldn't be a pleasant occupation."

She looked at him earnestly.

"You might; you could," she whispered, "but I wouldn't wait . . . that long. . . ."

Weeks had passed and October was offering its last glorious days. Not with madly colored leaves and lazy hazes of Indian summer that are gifts to men in the hardwood belt, but with the golden light, the infinite distances, the super silence which comes alone to Northern Arizona. The green was gone from grasses and those trees which drop their foliage were clothed only in the withered remains of leaves, but color of incredible variety was there — the mauves, the lavenders, the blues and purples and ochres of rock and soil, changing with the swinging sun, becoming bold and

vivid or only a tint and modest as the light rays played across the valley from various angles. The air, made crystal by the crisp nights, brought within the eyes' register ranges and peaks that were of astonishing distance. The wind was most gentle, coming in leisurely breaths and between its sighs the silence was immaculate, ravished by no jar or hum; even the birds were subdued before it.

On a typical October morning, before the sun had shoved itself above the eastern reaches of the valley, two men awoke in the new bunkhouse that had been erected at the Circle A ranch. They were in opposite beds, and, as they lifted their heads and stared hard at one another with that momentary bewilderment which follows the sleep of virile, active men, the shorter flung back his blankets and swung his feet to the floor. He rubbed his tousled hair and yawned and stretched.

"Awake!" he said, sleepily, and shook himself, ". . . awake,"—brightening. "Awake, for 'tis thy weddin' morn!"

The speaker was Tommy Clary and on his words Bruce Bayard grinned happily from his pillow.

". . . weddin' morn . . ." he murmured, as he sat up and reached for his boots at the head of his bunk.

"Yes, you wake up this mornin', frisky an' young an' full of th' love of life an' liberty, just like them pictures of th' New Year comin' in! An' by sundown you'll be roped an' tied for-good-an'-for-all-by-God, an' t' won't be long before you look like th' old year goin' out!"

He grinned, as he drew on his shirt, then dodged, as Bayard's heavy hat sailed at him.

"It's goin' to be th' other way round, Tommy," the big fellow cried. "We're going to turn time backward to-day!"

"Yes, I guess *you* are, all right," deliberated Tommy. "Marriage has always seemed to me like payin' taxes for somethin' you owned or goin' to jail for havin' too much fun; always like payin' for somethin'. But yourn ain't. Not much."

Bruce laughed. They talked in a desultory way until they had dressed. Then Bayard walked to the other side of the room where a sheet had been tacked and hung down over bulky objects. He pulled it aside and stood back that Tommy might see the clothing that hung against the wall.

"How's that for raiment?" he demanded.

Tommy approached and lifted the skirt of the black sack coat gingerly, critically. He turned it back, inspected the lining and then put his hand to his lips to signify shock.

"Oh, my gosh, Bruce! Silk linin'! You'll be curlin' your hair next!"

"Nothing too good for this fracas, Tommy. Best suit of clothes I could get made in Prescott. Those shoes — patent leather!" He picked up one and blew a fleck of dust from it carefully. "Cost th' price of a pair of boots an' don't look like they'd wear a mile." He reached into the pocket of the coat and drew out a

small package, unrolling it to display a necktie. "Pearl gray, they call it, Tommy. An' swell as a city bartender's!" He waved it in triumph before the sparkling eyes of his pug-nosed friend.

"Gosh, Bruce, you're goin' to be done out like a buck peacock, clean from your toes up. You —

"Say, what are you goin' to wear on your head?"

Bayard's hand dropped to his side and a crestfallen look crossed his features.

"I'm a sheepherder, if I didn't forget," he muttered.

"Holy Smoke, Bruce, you can't wear an ordinary cowpuncher hat with them varnished shoes an' that there necktie an' that dude suit!"

"I guess I'll have to, or go bareheaded."

Tommy looked at him earnestly for he thought that this oversight mattered, and his simple, loyal heart was touched.

"Never mind, Bruce," he consoled. "It'll be all right, prob'ly. She won't —"

"You go out and make me a crown of mistletoe, Tommy. Why, she wouldn't like me not to be some-thin' of my regular, everyday self. She'll like these clothes, but she'll like my old hat, too!"

Tommy seemed to be relieved.

"Yes, maybe she will," he agreed. "She's kinda sensible, Bruce. She ain't th' kind of a woman to jump her weddin' 'cause of a hat."

Bayard, in a sudden ecstasy of animal spirits, picked

the small cowboy up in his arms and tossed him toward the ceiling, as if he were a child, and stopped only when Tommy wound his arms about his neck in a strangling clasp.

"Le'me down, an' le'me show you my outfit!" he cried. "Don't get stuck on yourself an' think you're goin' to be th' only city feller at this party!"

Breathlessly Bayard laughed as he put him down and followed him to the bunk where he had slept with his war-bag for a pillow. Tommy seated himself, lifted the sack to his lap and, with fingers to his lips for silence, untied the strings.

"Levi's!" he whispered, hoarsely, as he drew out a pair of brand new overalls and shook them out proudly. "I ain't a reg'lar swell like you are," he exclaimed, "but even if I am poor I wear clean pants at weddin's!"

He groped in the bag again and drew out a scarf of gorgeous pink silk.

"Ain't that a eligent piece of goods?" he demanded, holding it out in the early sunlight.

"It is that, Tommy!"

"But that ain't all. Hist!"

He shifted about, hiding the bag behind his body that the surprise might be complete. Then, with a swift movement he held aloft proudly a stiff-bosomed shirt.

"Ah!" he breathed as it was revealed entirely. "How's that for tony?"

"That's great!"

“Reg’lar armor plate, Bruce! I’ve gentled th’ damn thing, too! Worked with him ’n hour yester-day. He bucked an’ rared an’ tried to fall over backwards with me, but I showed him reason after a while! Just proves that if a man sets his mind on anythin’ he can do it . . . even if it’s bein’ swell!”

Bruce laughed his assent and remarked to himself that the array of smudgy thumb prints about the collar band was eloquent evidence of the struggle poor Tommy had experienced.

“But this!” the other breathed, plunging again into the bag. “This here is —”

He broke short. “Why, you pore son-of-a-gun!” he whispered as he produced his collar.

Originally it had been a three-inch poke collar, but it was bent and broken and smeared on one side with a broad patch of dirty brown.

“Gosh a’mighty, Tommy, you’ve gone an’ crippled your collar!” Bruce said in rebuke.

“Crippled is right, an’ that ain’t all! Kind of a sick lookin’ pinto, he is, with that bay spot on him.” He looked up foolishly. “I ought to put that plug in my pocket. You see, I rode out fast, an’ this collar an’ my eatin’ tobacco was in th’ bottom of th’ bag tied on behind my saddle. Nig sweat an’ it soaked through an’ wet th’ tobacco an’ . . . desecrated my damn collar!”

He rose resolutely.

“A li’l thing like that can’t make me quit!” he cried. “I rode this here thing with its team-mate yesterday.

I won't be stampeded by no change in color. I've done my family wash in every stream between th' Spanish Peaks an' California. I won't stop at this!"

He strode from the bunk house and Bruce, looking through the window, saw him lift a bucket of water from the well and commence to scrub his daubed collar vigorously.

Smoke rose from the chimney of the ranch house and through the kitchen doorway Bayard saw a woman pass with quick, intent stride. It was Mrs. Boyd. She and Mrs. Weyl had arrived the day before to set the house aright and to deck the rooms in mountain greenery — mistletoe, juniper berries and other decorative growth.

The new bunkhouse, erected when plans for the wedding were first made, had been occupied for the first time by Bruce and Tommy that night. Tommy was to return in the spring and put his war-bag under the bunk for good, because Bruce was going in for more cattle and would be unable to handle the work alone.

A half hour later the men presented themselves for breakfast, to be utterly ignored by the bustling women. They were given coffee and steak and made to sit on the kitchen steps while they ate, that they might not be in the way. Bruce was amused and rebuked the women gently for the seriousness with which they went about their work, but for Tommy the whole procedure was a grave matter. He ate distractedly, hurriedly, covering his embarrassment by astonishing gastronomic feats, glancing sidelong at Bayard whenever the rancher

spoke to the others, as though those scarcely heeded remarks were something which made heavy demands upon human courage.

The interior of the house had been changed greatly. The kitchen range was new, the walls were papered instead of covered with whitewash. The room in which Ned Lytton had slept and fretted and come back toward health was no longer a bed chamber. Its windows had been increased to four that the light might be of the best. Its floor was painted and carpeted with new Navajo blankets and a bear skin. A piano stood against one wall and on either side of the new fireplace were shelves weighted with books that were to be opened and read and discussed by the light of the new reading lamp which stood on the heavy library table.

Tommy was obviously relieved when his meal was finished. He drew a long sigh when, wiping his mouth on a jumper sleeve, he stepped from the house and followed Bruce toward the corral where the saddle horses ate hay.

"It's a wonder you ain't ruined that horse, th' way you baby him," Clary remarked, when Bayard, brush in hand, commenced grooming Abe's sleek coat. "Now, with my Nig horse there, I figure that if he's full inside, he's had his share. I'm afraid that if I brushed him every day he'd get dudish an' unreliable, like me. . . . I'm ready to do a lot of rarin' an' runnin' every time I get good an' clean!"

"I guess th' care Abe's had hasn't hurt him much," Bruce replied. "He was ready when the pinch came; th' groomin' I'd been givin' him didn't have much to do with it, I know, but th' fact that we were pals . . . that counted."

His companion sobered and answered.

"You're right, there, Bruce, he sure done some tall travelin' that day."

"If he hadn't been ready . . . we wouldn't be planin' a weddin' this noon. That's how much it counted!"

Tommy moved closer and twined his fingers in the sorrel's mane. Neither spoke for a moment; then Clary blurted:

"She's got th' same kind of stuff, Bruce, or she wouldn't come through neither. Abe made th' run of his life and wasn't hurt by it; she went through about four sections of hell an'. . . . She looked like a Texas rose when she got off th' train last week!"

Bayard rapped the dust from his brush and answered:

"You're right; they're alike, Tommy. It takes heart, courage, to go through things that Ann an' Abe went through . . . different kinds. It wasn't so much what happened at th' mine. It was th' years she'd put in, abused, fearin', tryin' not to hate. That was what took th' sand, th' nerve. If she hadn't been th' right sort, she'd have crumpled up under it."

Clary said nothing for a time but eyed Bruce carefully, undisguised affection in his scrutiny. Then he spoke,

“My guess is that you two’ll set a new pace on this here trail to happiness!”

The forenoon dragged. Bruce completed the small tasks of morning and hunted for more duties to occupy his hands. The women would not allow him in the house, and beneath his controlled exterior he was in a fury of impatience. From time to time he glanced speculatively at the sun; then referred to his watch to affirm his judgment of the day’s growth.

Ann was still at the Boyd ranch and old Hi was to drive her to her new home before noon. Judson Weyl, who was to marry them, had been called away the day before but had given his word that he would leave Yavapai in time to reach the ranch with an ample margin, for Bruce insisted that there be no hitch in the plans. Long before either was due the big rancher frequently scanned the country to the north and east for signs of travelers.

“You’re about as contented as a hen with a lost chicken,” Tommy observed.

Bruce smiled slightly and scratched his chin.

“Well, I’d hate to have anything delay this round-up.”

Another hour dragged out before his repeated gaz-

ing was rewarded. Then, off in the east, a smudge of dust resolved itself into a team and wagon.

"That's Hi with Ann!" he said excitedly. "Our sky pilot ought to be here soon."

"Lots of time yet," Tommy assured. "He won't be leavin' town for a couple of hours."

"Maybe not, Tommy, but I don't trust that chariot of fire. I'm afraid it'll give its death rattle almost any time, dump our parson in th' road an' stop our weddin'. That'd be bad!"

Tommy roused to the dire possibilities of the situation.

"It would," he agreed. "It takes a preacher, a fool or a brave man to trust himself in a ve-hicle like that. He ought to come horseback. He —"

"Say, Bruce, why can't I saddle up an' lead a horse in after him? I can make it easy. That'd keep you from worryin'. Matter of fact, between th' women in th' house an' you with your fussin' outdoors I'm afraid my nerves won't stand it all! I've been through stampedes on th' Pecos, an' blizzards in Nebraska; I've been lost in Death Valley an' I've had a silver tip try to box my ears, but I just naturally can't break myself to p'lite society!"

"I don't believe you, but your idea wins," Bayard laughed. "Go on after him. Take . . . Say, you take Abe for him to ride back! That's th' thing to do. You put th' parson on Abe an' we'll be as certain to

start this fracas on time as I am that his 'bus is apt to secede from itself on th' road any minute!"

Bruce sent Abe away with Tommy. Ann arrived. Twenty minutes before the time set for the simple ceremony Abe brought the clergyman through the big gate of the Circle A with his swinging trot, ears up, head alert, as though with conscious pride.

"The fact is, Bruce, I'd have been late, if Tommy hadn't come after me," Weyl confessed as he dismounted.

"So? I've been expectin' somethin' would happen to you. What was it?"

"Why, Nicodemus, my off horse, kicked four spokes out of a front wheel and, when we were putting on another, we found that the axle was hopelessly cracked."

"I knew that chariot would quit sometime, but this horse, th' stallion shod with fire . . . he don't know what quittin' is!"

The sun was slipping toward the western horizon when the last of the few who had attended the ceremony passed from sight. For a long time Bruce and Ann stood under the ash tree, watching them depart, hearing the last sounds of wheel and hoof and voice break in on the evening quiet.

The girl was wonderfully happy. The strained look about her eyes, the quick, nervous gestures that had characterized her after the tragedy of Ned Lytton's death and before her return to the East, were

gone. A splendid look of peace was upon her; one life was gone, thrown away as a piece of botched work; another was opening.

Far away to the north and eastward snow-covered peaks, triplets, rose against the bright blue of the sky. As Bruce and Ann looked they lost the silver whiteness and became flushed with the pink of dying day. The distant, pine-covered heights had become blue, the far draws were gathering their purple mists of evening. The lilac of the valley's coloring grew fainter, more delicate, while the deep mauves of a range of hills to the southward deepened towards a dead brown. Over all, that incomparable silence, the inexplicable peace that comes with evening in those big places. No need to dwell further on this for you who have watched and felt and become lost in it; useless to attempt more for the uninitiate.

Ann's arm slipped into her husband's and she whispered:

"Evening on Manzanita! Is there anything more beautiful?"

Bayard smiled.

"Not unless it's daytime," he said. "You know, Ann, for a long, long time it's seemed to me as though there's been a shadow on that valley. Even on the brightest days it ain't looked like it should. But now. . . . Why, even with the sun goin' down, it seems to me as if that shadow's lifted!

"I feel freer, too. This fenced-in feelin' that I've

had is gone. I . . . Why, I feel like life, the world, was all open to me, smilin' at me, waitin' for me, just like that old valley out there.

"What do you s'pose makes it so?"

"Must I tell you?" she asked, reaching her arms upward for his neck.

"Tell me," he said. "With your lips, but without words. That's a kind of riddle, I guess! Do you know the answer?"

Indeed, she did!

THE END

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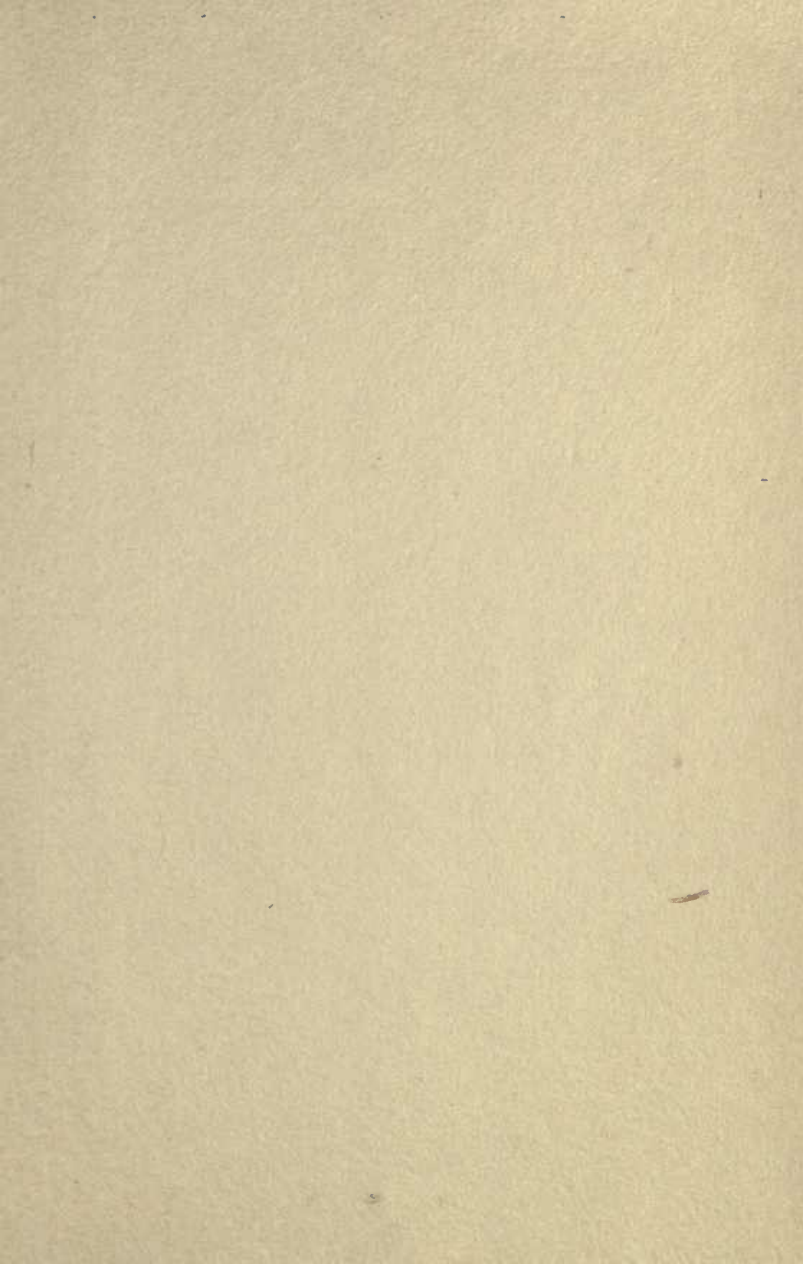
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